A GURKHA'S STORY

The explosive true story of the first Gurkha in the SAS

JOHNNY GURKHA

In this book, for the very first time, a Gurkha soldier tells his own story. Growing up as a 'hill boy' in rural Nepal, he dreams of joining the legendary Brigade of Gurkhas, and emulating his father's military prowess in World War Two.

The dream is not easy to fulfil, the road rugged, perilous and sometimes lonely. Courage, tenacity and toughness are called for, both on and off the battlefield. And little does that hill boy imagine that one day, he will be wearing the 'Who Dares Wins' insignia, and become the first Gurkha to join the SAS.

With fascinating, detailed descriptions of selection, training and deployments on active service, accompanied by stunning original photographs, 'A Gurkha's Story' is a thrilling and truthful account of the Gurkha experience both past and present, and reveals what life is really like for the men who serve.

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A Gurkha's Story

The explosive true story
of the first Gurkha in the SAS

By Johnny Gurkha

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of those who have fallen

Major Alexander Matthew Roberts

Lance Corporal Siddanta Kunwar

All Gurkha officers and soldiers who have given their lives in Afghanistan

Acknowledgements

In creating this book thanks are due to my family for their steadfast encouragement and support, to kind friends and colleagues who provided helpful and constructive feedback, and to John Parker for his invaluable assistance throughout.

My father

Retired as Capt (QGO) from the Indian Gurkhas in 1947, soon after the independence of India.

Author's Note

When, in 1815, Lieutenant Frederick Young of the British East India Company was taken prisoner by Nepalese Gurkhas, he knew that his captors were a formidable foe; tough, skilful and brave. Spending enforced time in their company it occurred to him that it would make infinitely more sense to fight with them rather against them, and suggested an alliance. This, according to historical record is how the first Gurkha regiment, the Sirmoors, came into existence.

From thenceforward, for two hundred years, from their decisive actions in the Indian Mutiny, the Gurkhas have served with the British across the globe, distinguishing themselves most notably throughout the two World Wars, the Malayan campaign, the Falklands War, the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan. The Gurkhas of the British Army are now familiar throughout the world, and thousands more also continue to serve in the Nepalese and Indian Armies.

Our warrior forefathers earned high regard for their courage, loyalty and sacrifice, and won many decorations including Victoria Crosses, and in India the equivalent Param Vir Chakra. This reputation for gallantry and endurance in the face of danger has continued to be reaffirmed by subsequent generations. Among their allies and other nations the Gurkhas have inspired respect and admiration, while for their enemies they instil fear.

The history and achievements of the Gurkhas have been written about over many years, but never before has there been an autobiography, a true, first hand account of life as a serving Gurkha, by a Gurkha soldier himself. I am grateful for the opportunity to tell that story to you now.

Johnny Gurkha

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'Better to die than live as a coward'

The Gurkha motto

'Who Dares Wins'

SAS motto

'We are the Pilgrims, master, we shall go
Always a little further, it may be
Beyond that last blue mountain barred with snow
Across that angry or that glimmering sea'

From 'The Golden Journey to Samarkand'
By James Elroy Flecker

Inscribed on the SAS memorial clock at Hereford

As I write these last words, my thoughts return to you who were my comrades, the stubborn and indomitable peasants of Nepal. Once more I hear the laughter with which you greeted every hardship. Once more I see you in your bivouacs or about your fires, on forced march or in the trenches, now shivering with wet and cold, now scorched by a pitiless and burning sun. Uncomplaining you endure hunger and thirst and wounds; and at the last your unwavering lines disappear into the smoke and wrath of battle. Bravest of the brave, most generous of the generous, never had country more faithful friends than you.

Professor Sir Ralph Turner MC, 3rd Gurkhas, written in his English Nepali dictionary after the First World War. The last sentence now inscribed on the Gurkha War Memorial at the Ministry of Defence.

Highway 1. Helmand Province: 4th October 2007 0745 hrs

We were by now approximately eight kilometres from FOB Wilson, the Canadian Forward Operating Base. Our thirty vehicles comprised a series of laden supply and ammunition trucks, guarded by WMIKS (Weapons Mounted In Kit - open top vehicles fitted with guns). Being in charge of security and second in command I had been deployed in a WMIK close to the front in order to oversee the progress of the convoy.

In the command vehicle, among others were our OC (Officer Commanding) FAC (Forward Air Controller) and RMO (Regimental Medical Officer) The OC, Major Alex Roberts I knew well having served with him in Bosnia. Relatively young yet a highly professional soldier, his many achievements included that of instructor to Prince William at Sandhurst. A strong leader, he was also the type of officer prepared to listen to his men and utilise their input where appropriate. Being of similar age, and like me a family man I valued the Major as both a trusted colleague and friend, and was pleased to be acting as his 2 IC for the operation.

It had not so far been an entirely smooth journey. Major Roberts had gone over our preparations with a relentless fine-tooth comb before leaving Camp Bastion; fuel, vehicles, equipment, weapons, personnel, plans and up to the minute intelligence on our route – all had been checked and double-checked. Only when everything was deemed finally ready, under cover of darkness we had set out. The plan was to rest at the Canadian FOB en route during the coming daylight hours, before continuing to our final destination of Kandahar. Since we would be travelling on one of the most dangerous roads in Afghanistan, Highway Number 1, air cover would be following the convoy.

Before leaving the HQ perimeter at Camp Bastion, a Snatch Land Rover had rolled off the road. Fortunately no one was hurt, but the Snatch had to be returned to the base and the occupants reassigned to other vehicles. Then, adding to the confusion during departure one section of the convoy had turned in one direction, while the remainder went off down the opposite fork, taking them full circle round the ring road until they linked up again.

The biggest setback however had occurred later, at around the halfway mark. It was only one truck in the total of thirty vehicles that had shuddered abruptly and inexplicably to a halt in the middle of the desert. That was all it took to bring the whole convoy to a standstill. Stranded in Helmand Province in high visibility on the notorious Highway Number 1, surrounded by the vast barren terrain in which isolated Coalition forces had so often proved sitting targets for invisible hands to unleash death out of thin air, we had had no desire to hang around. Standard procedure with a broken-down vehicle was to tow it

and get underway again as quickly as possible. In this instance however it simply couldn't be done, the vehicle's wheels having completely seized up.

The vehicle mechanics had set to work immediately, on what might have been thought a simple job; despite their best efforts though the wheels of the truck would not budge. The convoy chain was now only as strong, or mobile as its weakest link, for in this territory splitting up was not an option. Meanwhile all eyes and ears strained towards the dim horizon, peering at the road ahead and behind for any sign of approach or movement. All was silent in the hot, dark desert save for the grunts of the sweating mechanics and the intermittent reverberating clang of their spanners, and the occasional reassuring roar of our escorting aircraft keeping a watchful eye on our progress, or lack of.

Two hours later the wheels of the truck were freed, and with a muted cheer along the convoy engines were started and we were on our way again. The relief though was soon overlaid by a fresh concern; the two-hour delay meant we would soon be entering daylight hours. Our air cover, tasked with other priorities had left at 0500 hours and the skies above were now empty. We were on our own.

The consolation was that FOB Wilson lay only eight kilometres away; in less than an hour we would be inside the safety of the Canadian base. With the breaking dawn the landscape slowly took shape around us, the earth waking and stretching. At the outskirts of a village people and creatures were stirring, human voices and animals bleating merging with the hum of early morning traffic. Toyotas and 'jingly' trucks carrying merchandise and livestock passed us by. The

inhabitants, hunched at first light, seemed slowly to straighten, emerging from the cover of their shawls to begin their day, looking out at us as the rising sun warmed them.

As we drove steadily past the village my eyes switched between the road ahead and the high-walled houses to our right. It was just as we drew level with a narrow alleyway, that everything suddenly and violently erupted. It began with a deafening noise, pounding my eardrums and sending shockwaves through my body. Simultaneously the scene in front of my colleagues and I was dramatically transformed. The brand new Vector vehicle that had been travelling a short way ahead of us was flung several metres into the air and came hurtling down again, landing at an oblique angle with a loud, prolonged crashing and grinding of metal and springs. In its wake, from the sky, huge slabs of tarmac and concrete began raining down, smashing into the ground and gouging great holes into the sand and topsoil beneath what had been the road. It had all taken but a few seconds, but the devastation was incredible.

My whole body was tense with shock as the dust began to settle. Like my own driver, the entire convoy had slammed on the brakes on hearing the blast, and all down the line the company sat rigid. Just as visibility began to normalise there came another sound that sent a fresh burst of adrenalin tearing through my veins: the sharp rat-a-tat of gunfire, coming from enemy forces hidden somewhere in the village. As the shots raked the ground around the convoy I listened expectantly for my OC Major Roberts to come on the radio; waiting for him to take control, to hear the vital, reassuring voice of command that would tell us all what to do. But there was nothing, the radio remained silent. Ahead of us, the Vector, containing

the OC, our Signaller, Forward Air Controller and RMO was motionless its bodywork smashed and crumpled, the wheels twisted and half-buried in sand.

From along the convoy there came sporadic shouts and cries: what should we do? We all wanted to know. As nominated 2 IC, if anything happened to the OC, I was to take over command. In such a situation, although knowing and preparing beforehand what you will have to do if things kick off, you rarely think in terms of it actually happening, at least I hadn't. Perhaps the OC was unconscious, along with the others in the Vector. The gunfire had paused. The danger now, for which we had been well briefed, was a follow-up attack, either from secondary devices already concealed nearby or rocket-propelled grenades and further small arms fire – possibly all three. I had to do something.

Over the radio I ordered our top cover gunners into all round defence of the convoy. Ahead, the wrecked command vehicle remained ominously silent, with no sign of life. Mingled with the fear and apprehension of what might come next, I felt a sudden rush of anger that I could see no one and nothing to strike back at, only the evidence of the enemy's wilful, calculated and callous destructiveness.

Somehow we had to reach Major Roberts and the other men inside the Vector; staying in the WMIK afforded some protection from snipers, but with the possibility of further IED primed and hidden nearby in the ground it would be madness to drive even a millimetre in any direction. Telling my colleagues to stay put, I took a deep breath, stepped cautiously out on to the road, and walked slowly forward, my body tense, blood pumping, expecting every second a bullet, an explosion or both.

1. A Nepalese Childhood

My family's home was much like all the others in the straggling ribbon of sixty or so houses that made up our village, a rough structure of mud and sticks with a thatched roof, halfway up a very steep hill. Out of this hill, for the cultivation of crops were carved a series of level terraces stacked one upon the other like an open chest of drawers, rising from the mists of the valley and ascending towards the clouds.

At intervals on the hill, where one or more trees happened to give shade, stones had been heaped to provide resting places for the elderly and weary, or those laden with provisions as they climbed laboriously up the winding path to their home, visiting a neighbour to work their land, or to deliver or collect rice or grain.

Our houses had no glass, only wooden shutters that could be closed at night or when the weather was cold. There was no electricity and hence no TV, radio, fridge or any other such appliance in the home. When daylight ended, a small earthenware dish with some kerosene and a wick might be lit, allowing those that could, to read until the little puddle of precious fuel burned out.

Cooking was carried out on an open fire, the wood smoke filling the room until finding its way out through doors or windows. A pot of rice, millet or maize, with vegetables would be prepared with spices of chilli, ginger, turmeric and onion. All were home grown except for cumin and other Indian spices and salt, which were bought in the village. The pot would be

placed on a three-legged iron stand in the centre of the fire to simmer away. Meat being scarce, perhaps once a fortnight there would be some goat or chicken, or eggs.

My father, a retired Indian Army Subedar (equivalent to Captain, Queen's Gurkha Officer) and Second World War veteran who had fought in the far east, and was already over sixty years old when I was still a small child, would be watching over me in between working about the house or in the field. Father had several medals, including the Burma Star, though he never wore them. He had experienced the conflict at close hand, his abiding memory that of seeing his brother-in-law shot in the abdomen by the Japanese. With his dying breath the brother-in-law had entrusted my father with a message for his wife, though what it was I was never told. At the end of the war some 250,000 ex-soldiers had returned home to Nepal from service in India, their medals, like my father's consigned to a cupboard or thrown away.

My father retired in 1947, the year after Indian Independence, thus serving his entire career under the British. Among his age group in the district around two-thirds were retired Gurkhas from the British East India Company. It might thus sound surprising that there was no such thing as a veterans' association, and that while the personal memories of war undoubtedly lived on, no formal framework existed for sharing them. For these men their battles once fought had to be put aside, as the daily struggle to survive in Nepal went on.

My father's only reunions consisted of meeting old comrades on his long trips to Pokhara to present his pension patta (book) and claim the small entitlement of cash. The queue of pensioners usually stretched to hundreds, whom the officials were unable to process in a single day. Taking into account the journey to and from Pokhara my father would often be away for three days. The inconvenience was never questioned, since for ordinary

Nepalese people there was no such thing as banking. My father was among the more fortunate; pensions were given only to those with a minimum length of time in the British Army, so many deserving World War Two veterans who had served less than the requisite number of years received nothing at all. These men had to rely solely on their extended family or neighbours for sustenance in their old age.

My mother, like all the women, would be performing the hardest toil, out all day cultivating our own or someone else's land, depending on the time of year and what needed to be done. The villagers worked communally throughout the seasons; teams of women and boys sowing the long, stepped terraces with millet, rice, maize and wheat, tending the crops – while praying the rains would not wash them out - and then at harvest time gathering in the fruits of their labours. Early morning the village children would also be out working the land for an hour or two before grabbing their bags and hurrying off to school, returning home later to do more agricultural work.

This routine was not for recreation or to pass the time, but an absolute necessity for survival. On the extremely steep terrain, with a complete absence of mechanisation it was hard, repetitive labour. Everything had to be done by hand, including the backbreaking task of banking up the soil around the long lines of crops to protect them. To fetch a few baskets of grain from the bottom of our village might take me a whole hour of arduous climbing up and down the hill.

Our communal forest provided further physical challenges for the village boys. Here we climbed high up the trees, cutting branches for firewood and timber for houses and animal shelters, while the trunks were left to replenish themselves. Considerable strength and agility was developed, the long drop to the ground

an incentive to hang on tight while red ants bit your arms and legs. If nothing else I was growing up to be extremely fit and tenacious.

At night we slept on thin straw mattresses rolled out on the floor, my younger brothers and myself alongside my father, my young sisters with my mother. Drifting off to sleep, I would listen to the chorus of toads and crickets talking to one another in the rocks, and from early April the Kaffal bird, named after the ripened fruit it came in search of, signalled the arrival of spring. Less welcome were the chattering monkeys cursed for their sudden raiding parties that could strip our cereal crop bare. Special lookout posts were erected, like shooting hides in which villagers would wait and watch, beating loudly on a drum at the first sight of the monkeys to drive them away. Other undesirables were the shrieking wild cats, foxes and jackals stalking the farms for chickens, leaving only feathers the next morning, to the distress of the owners deprived of their much-valued supply of eggs. Sometimes I would hear, emanating from higher ground or the heart of the dense forest, the deep spine-tingling roar of a tiger.

The seasons in Nepal brought changing scenery; during the summer months the monsoon tended to blanket the landscape in cloud, bringing with it long, loud rumbles of thunder and high winds that caused the huge tree overhanging our house to creak and sway. At night, lying in bed and hearing the ominous movements of the heavy branches so close to the roof above my head, the fear that it might at any moment crash down and crush us all sometimes kept me awake. With the onset of autumn the views became much clearer and brighter. To the west lay the Annapurna mountain range, to the east and north those of Lang-Tang, Ganesh and Lamjung. At daybreak the mist shrouding the valley below would begin to disperse, while

the first glinting rays of dawn touched the distant outline of Annapurna, painting a soft red glow over the horizon. Then there came shadow, followed by intermittent bursts of dazzling light as the sun rose slowly out from behind the jagged mountain peaks. This majestic vista, heralding the piercingly blue skies of a crystal clear autumn day would greet me each morning as I made my way to school. Come the evening, as the sun descended, the same red sky would mark the close of the day.

Money was not much used, most of our essentials being bartered for. We were clothed day and night in simple shirts and trousers, woven from Indian cotton and sewn by our village tailor, providing him by longstanding arrangement with bags of grain or other produce in exchange for his skilled handiwork. There were similar relationships with other tradesmen, including the blacksmith who made the iron tools we needed to till the soil. Salt, sugar, kerosene for the earthenware lamps, and other basics were bought from the small store. A day's work in the paddy fields was best done bare-footed; the only shoes available were flip-flops, offering some protection to the feet on flat ground, but slippery and impractical on the slopes, causing cut and bruised toes. There was little else one could buy.

As I grew up I became aware that our family was often the subject of gossip among the locals. The reasons behind it seemed to have originated sometime before my existence, and it was only slowly, piece by piece, that I understood the full facts and their effects on various people's attitudes towards the family, as well as within it. The background was that my father, in his twenties, had married a woman of similar age, and from his own caste, and with her had three sons and two daughters. After his career in the Indian Army, on retiring at the age of fifty he had gone on to join the Nepalese Army, which at that time was expanding, as a company commander. It was during

this time whilst on active service in the Nepalese Army that he had met another, much younger woman. Attracted to her, he had put aside his wife and children and taken up with this new partner.

There had been no official divorce or re-marriage; my father had simply exchanged one woman for another. His first wife had continued living, with her sons and daughters (destined soon to be my much older stepbrothers and stepsisters - in fact apart from one, these offspring would all be older than my mother), in the original marital home. For a while they all co-existed under the one roof, until two of my stepbrothers and both stepsisters were themselves married. Then came the announcement from one of them that a baby was on the way. For my father's first wife, who had remained sad following her rejection, the prospect of a grandchild provided a great uplift to her spirits. When the little boy was born she was overjoyed. A few days later however, to the shock and distress of the whole family the infant died.

In that same year 1968, my mother gave birth to a little boy, me. To see her husband and his new wife with a new baby turned my stepmother's unbearable grief for her grandson into anger and resentment, and she and my father began frequent and violent arguments. My mother, knowing her presence offended my stepmother, kept largely silent, and out of the way as much as possible. However the situation became so tense that after a time my father and mother moved out to a smaller house nearby, to raise their own family.

My father's desertion of his first wife was not in itself unheard of in the patriarchal society of Nepal, where at that time it was legally permissible for a man to have more than one wife. In my parents' case however, there was something more. That my mother was very much younger - twenty-four

when my father took up with her, he at sixty almost old enough to be her grandfather – certainly caused raised eyebrows, but this in itself was not the real scandal. The primary reason for social disapproval towards the couple was that my father was genetically Rajput Mongol and a Thakuri, a relatively high caste, while my mother was of Mongolian race, her appearance self-evident of the fact. The 'unacceptable' difference between them was plain to see; Thakuris were the caste of the Nepalese Royal family, Mongolians, despite being a larger numerical group in the country were regarded by many as an underclass.

As a half-caste child, though my stepbrothers and stepsisters were not unkind to me, I had a sense of being looked down on. My mother was a Mongolian, and this could not be ignored. Boys being generally far more esteemed in Nepalese society, I was looked after, but the sense of exclusion was always made plain in social situations. Though my father and mother were both Hindus, and in the home we were a happy family, their separate castes created a certain unease when outside the house or in social situations. A person's caste was always paramount, rather than their qualities as an individual. Any perceived fault in a child tended to be immediately ascribed to their caste. Young people growing up were conditioned to believe their future prospects were determined by the caste they happened to have been born into. The principle that all children should have equal opportunity to achieve to the best of their ability was simply not a feature of traditional Nepalese culture; caste came first in deciding a child's potential, or lack of it, and I myself felt the effects of this.

Starting school at the age of five, I found the situation different. Here caste differences were officially at least, put aside, since there were rules and guidelines against discrimination. Lessons were in Nepalese, with some basic instruction in the English

alphabet and grammar, though none of our teachers could speak much English. We learned the history and geography of Nepal and its formation, and later on about the British Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries, when steam powered looms had started mass production of textiles, and railways and new roads transformed the country. Outside the classroom in my own country, some two centuries after these developments in Britain, we were still travelling on foot along dirt tracks, our clothes woven on hand looms.

The fact I went to school at all was a progression from my father's childhood, when there was no education outside Kathmandu, and hardly anyone could read or write Nepali or English. It was the custom for Gurkhas who had acquired such skills in the army to bring the letters they had composed to their families home with them on leave, then sit down to read them aloud to the intended recipients, i.e. the assembled relatives and friends. Those few relatives who could read were still given the letters in person, since the country had no internal postal system to deliver them. 'Dead letters', informing a soldier's family of his death was the one exception. These dreaded missives, written in red ink, were dispatched to the unfortunate household by army courier. To this day in Nepal, people do not like using or seeing red ink. During my childhood in the 1970s Nepal was a few hundred years behind Europe. In my father's youth, circa 1920 it was closer to the Stone Age.

We saw few white people, or 'Gorah' as they were called. The English specifically were known as 'Angrej', the English language 'Angregee'. One of the first fair-skinned people I encountered, was a man I noticed wandering inquisitively along a path one day. Around his neck he had a large and impressive looking camera. When he saw me he took my picture, encouraging me to sit on a gate, then swing comically

upside down while he snapped away. I felt so happy he had done this, and told all my friends, thinking or hoping he would one day send me the pictures. In later years I wondered where these photographs of Nepalese village life had finished up - in someone's dusty album, or even published in a book somewhere perhaps.

Another time some outsiders came excavating, delightedly taking away a number of old medals they seemed to think valuable or interesting. Occasionally Westerners arrived to teach for a while in our school, bringing fresh ideas. Some of the villagers had radio, via which we occasionally gleaned, at second or third hand, information about the outside world. A dominant story seemed to be the Cold War between the two superpowers, with America said to support Pakistan, the Russians backing India. The radio also brought news of an actual war, the long running Iran Iraq border conflict, in which over the years millions would die.

During early childhood I grew steadily and healthily, then during my ninth year something went wrong. It began as tiredness and loss of appetite. As my temperature climbed my mother dispatched me to bed, expecting me to recover shortly. But the fever grew more intense, until I could barely sit up, let alone stand. The days and nights passed with no sign of improvement. I slept much of the time, disturbed by bad dreams and hallucinations, babbling deliriously for long periods while half conscious, all the while my temperature worryingly high. The days turned into weeks and still I ate nothing, taking only water, my body thin and weakening.

My mother was very frightened now. The natural fear that her child might die was compounded by the implications of this; when she had been blessed with a son it had lifted her from the ignominious position of being Mongolian, and a second wife.

She had the assurance of a future breadwinner who would care for her in old age, or so she had believed. Help was urgently required but medical treatment cost money, which my parents did not have. The Nepalese custom was in any case to go not to a doctor, but the local witchdoctor. From my date and time of birth the witchdoctor drew up an astrological chart, and based on the conjunction of the moon, sun and other planets, advised my parents to visit the temple and offer prayers to the gods. When this failed to produce results my mother hauled me out of bed and carried me on her back the half hour walk to the nearest clinic. There was no doctor but a health visitor, who after a brief examination gave me an injection. This quickly lowered the temperature, but still very feeble I was returned to bed. My parents' worry now was that if I relapsed the only resort was a hospital further away, and they could not afford such a journey, let alone pay for doctors.

After lingering for another two weeks, to the huge relief of the family I began to look slightly better, and take sustenance. The illness had lasted over a month, the fever and malnourishment reducing me to a bag of bones. Trying to stand upright made me dizzy and liable to collapse. This weakness stayed with me, and it was to be another two years before I felt fully recovered. No one seemed to know what was wrong at the time, but later typhoid was thought probable. Like most Nepalese children, I had had no inoculations against this or any other disease.

Just when I had finally shaken off illness, it descended upon our family again, this time one of my younger sisters. About one and a half years old, she was a beautiful little girl and growing well, until she began to be troubled by her eyes. (I believe now she was developing cataracts.) Once again my parents consulted the witchdoctor, who produced an astrological chart and advised prayers. As her condition worsened, the prayers were offered

day and night. A few weeks later my sister died. My parents, particularly my mother, were devastated with grief. However along with the kind condolences of family and neighbours, was the sad recognition that my sister's survival might have been worse in a way, as she would likely have been blind and incapacitated, and with no welfare or social services in Nepal it would have been very hard to provide proper long term care for her, especially when my parents themselves became frail.

As I approached the school leaving age of fifteen, the practical consequences of my father having a second family began to affect us. His army pension was around two hundred rupees – equivalent to just under £5 a month at that time – and one third of this sum went by law to the first family. Even growing some of our own food and bartering for other essentials, the income was not sufficient for the other seven of us – Dad and Mum by now had four more children, my three sisters and the youngest, my brother - to survive on. Now in his seventies, my father was naturally concerned about my mother's long-term future, and that of his children. As my mother's eldest son it was expected I would provide for her, and look after my younger siblings in the years to come.

The basic qualification at fifteen was the SLC –School Leaving Certificate – and I just about scraped through with a pass. But to obtain a well paid job required further education, which in Nepal cost money. We did not have it. On leaving school there was little I could do but hang about the house and work the fields as before, doing my bit to try to make ends meet through self-sufficiency. But the small piece of land left to us after the step-relations had taken their rightful share simply could not produce adequate food for our growing family. Meanwhile time was not standing still. My father was growing older, and increasingly anxious about the future for all of us.

2. The Arrival of the Gallawallah

While still a schoolboy, I had often spent the time after lessons visiting or working at a friend or neighbour's house some distance from our own. As we had no telephones, to summon me home of an evening my mum would have had to walk a long way, were it not for the fact we lived in a steep sided valley. This topography had the acoustics of an amphitheatre. Mum had only to step outside her door and shout my name, her voice would reverberate around the hills and I could never claim I hadn't heard her.

There was another sound that carried far. It came only every couple of years, but signalled to the male youth of the village something far more exciting than bedtime. It was the deep, pulsing beat of amplified music, and my friends and I knew what it meant – the Lahure were back! Hearing the booming rhythms something would quicken within us, and at the first opportunity, drawn by the music we would hurry down to the centre of the village. Here, stood or sat around chatting in small groups were the newly returned young men known as the Lahure. Only one or two might be from our own village, the others stopping off for a while or waiting for a bus connection to take them on the next leg of their journey home. They lounged proudly in their imported finery – smart Western clothes, shiny leather shoes, expensive cameras and accoutrements. The centrepieces, much admired by the local boys and girls were the Lahure's shiny, brand new, duty-free stereo music systems, powered by big alkaline batteries, blasting out for hours on end into the hills.

The word Lahure derived from the city of Lahore, formerly in India, where during the time of the British East India Company Nepalese boys would go to join the Gurkhas. Those who had succeeded, returning proudly years later on leave were dubbed Lahure. Nowadays their destination for training, and the source of the clothes and duty-free stereos was Hong Kong, the 'Crown Colony' a magical place far away in the South China Sea. Growing up in landlocked Nepal my friends and I had never even seen the sea, the vast expanse of water we were told covered three quarters of the world, an incredible vision we could only imagine. The Lahure were incredible too. How did one become a member of this glamorous elite?

My father had told me how it worked in the old days. Once a year recruiting officers would come to the villages, find the very fittest, strongest boys and take them off to the depot. This was not a short trip; with no buses or other transport then, the boys walked with the officers all the way to India, to the city of Gorakhpur, location of one of the Indian Gurkha recruiting depots. From our own village this journey would have taken around two weeks, sleeping overnight in shacks along the way. These resting places were provided by local people, with pots of water and shelter offered from a sense of communal, religious duty to the young would-be Gurkha recruits and other weary travellers.

There was no application process – the potential recruits were almost literally rounded up. Rarely was there even consultation with the boys' parents, many of whom, given the lack of opportunities in Nepal were pleased or at least accepting of the fact that their sons might be chosen for the army, which would provide a career, and most importantly money for the family. This method of filling the Gurkha ranks continued until after the Second World War. Following Indian Independence,

the multiple regiments were split between India and Britain, the 2nd 6th 7th and 10th Gurkha Rifles notably being taken by Britain, mainly for service in what was then Malaya, now Malaysia. The Indian Gurkhas comprised the 1st 3rd 4th 5th 8th 9th and 11th each of which included several battalions. (Large numbers of Gurkhas in these regiments continue to serve in the Indian Army to this day).

In my father's time pay and pensions were on a par in the Indian and British service, though after Independence there quickly evolved a significant difference in terms and conditions, and the British Gurkhas in Malaya were soon on better pay than their Indian counterparts. In the course of negotiations India and Britain had in fact agreed a treaty regarding the use of the Gurkhas (though ordinary Nepalese people would have been unaware of this at the time, since there were no radios or other outside communications) and selection came in.

It is probably no exaggeration to say that the burning ambition of most Nepalese hill boys was to, one day, join the Gurkhas. Likewise the families, for in a country of such poverty and so few prospects, having your son chosen for an army career was a great prize, bringing money and honour. The kudos attached to the Gurkhas was also a double-edged sword, and there was bitter disappointment, shame even for the many who tried and failed to get in.

Though like most boys I would have loved to join the British Gurkhas, I felt there was little chance. When recovered from the illness that had so debilitated me, and fit and strong once more, my physique remained lean and wiry, not the more chunky muscular type normally seen in the Brigade. Then there was my caste; the British recruiting officers, advised by high-ranking Gurkhas, tended not to select Thakuris - my father's caste, and the predominant clan in our village. The nepotism of Nepalese

culture meant the castes that had long prevailed in the Brigade – in the Eastern Nepal battalions Rai and Limbu, in the Western Gurung and Magar – tended to look after their own when it came to selection. So for me the Gurkhas seemed out of the question. Meanwhile, neither the situation at home nor my own employment prospects were showing any sign of improvement. Looking at my dear father, slowing down now and entering old age, no longer able to work as he once had and no doubt feeling increasingly helpless, I yearned to make him and my mother proud, and set both their minds at rest about the future.

It was almost two years after I had left school when one day a stranger came to our village. He was a recruiting officer for the Indian Gurkhas. Though Thakuris were rarely taken on in the British Gurkhas, the Indian Army, though also oversubscribed, might I thought be more accessible, particularly as this officer was recruiting for the 9th Gurkha Rifles, my father's old regiment until 1947. I knew his fondest wish was to see his children educated, but there was no hope of that at present without money. I started to think again about the idea of the army – a career with regular income, money that could be used to support my mother and brother and sisters. Here was a chance, however small, for me to change things for the better.

However when I spoke to my father about it I realised there were other considerations preying on his mind. During an honest and emotional conversation, he told me he thought it quite likely he would die in the next two to three years. If I were accepted into the army, it would mean being away from home for many months on end. My father made it clear that now especially, he did not want me to go away, but desired me by his side in his last years. I too felt intense sadness at the prospect of leaving him now. But what was to be done? He had also said to me, 'Look after the family.' The family was facing poverty, even

starvation, and the opportunity to avoid such a fate would not be there forever. My father and I, through our love for one another, felt all too sharply the pain of this dilemma. My thoughts were conflicted, my heart aching with indecision. If I failed I would be despondent yet relieved I could remain with my father – his feelings too I felt sure. If I succeeded and was accepted in the Gurkhas, the price was to leave and perhaps never see him again. All I could do was apply; the difficult decision would have to wait until the outcome was known.

The day of the village selection arrived. The tests were very simple, consisting mainly of assessing the candidates' physical attributes. All boys had their chest measurements taken - both expanded and contracted - and were asked to perform running, sit-ups and press-ups. There were tests of basic arithmetic and English – not much more than to add up and write your name. At the end of the session, to my great surprise I heard my name called out.

The next stage was to travel to Gorakhpur in India where the successful candidates from each village would gather, along with many others who were applying directly. These were boys who had not been selected for the British Gurkhas and were now trying for the Indian Army instead. These applicants would form long lines outside the recruiting office on the first day of each month. Since the majority were rejected, many would apply month after month, often staying in the area with relatives and taking odd jobs in restaurants to support themselves in the meantime. Since I had been selected from my village I did not have to wait in line but went straight in. The Indian Gurkhas were known to operate a caste-based system of recruitment, with each battalion drawn from separate ethnic/regional groups

- the Gurung and Magar of West Nepal, the Rai and Limbu of East Nepal, and a mix of Chetri and Thakuri from East and West.

The thought of going to Gorakhpur seemed a very big undertaking. I had never even been as far as our capital city of Kathmandu, let alone ventured beyond the borders of Nepal. I was also warned it could be a dangerous venture; the city of Gorakhpur and the lonely roads that would take me there were frequented by thieves laying in wait for solitary travellers, and alarming stories of people being attacked and robbed were well known. Since I had no knowledge even of the route I should take, some relatives who had been in the Indian Army gave me detailed directions on where I could wait for and change buses, what destinations to ask for, and which landmarks to look out for when alighting. On the day of my departure, having concealed 300 rupees carefully in my clothing, I went to say goodbye to my father. Bending down in the traditional Nepalese ritual for both greeting and farewell, I bowed my head towards him. Placing his hands gently on my head, he said 'God Bless You' and wished me a safe journey.

I had no such thing as a passport and fortunately there was no requirement for one to cross the border into India. Following the directions given me, after two long bus journeys I arrived at the Gorakhpur terminus. It was high summer and the temperature in the city was soaring into the forties. I had never been to such a large centre of population and the scenes around me were boggling; streets crowded with rickshaws, bullock carts and people, while hooting trucks and cars tried to force their way through. At the railway station a huge steam engine was waiting to pull out, its carriages crammed with passengers, while those who could not squeeze inside clambered to the roof or hung on the sides. Everywhere there seemed to be noise and chaos.

The few rupees I had left could not be spent on any kind of hotel, since, if I failed the selection I would need money for the return fare home. Seeing some Nepalese people I made enquires, found an available rickshaw and gave the driver an address. We travelled through the busy streets, twisting and turning for a couple of miles, until arriving outside a tin shack. I paid the rickshaw driver his fare, then paid a further couple of rupees to a man that appeared from the shack, and was shown to a space on the floor. There were already a few other Nepalese boys there, and more gradually arrived. Settling down for the night and hoping for a good sleep before attending the selection the next day, we were woken by a huge roaring overhead, amplified to deafening proportions by the tin structure. It turned out our accommodation was close to an Indian Air Force base, and the planes, large snub-nosed ex Soviet models, were landing and taking off above us.

Early next morning I arrived outside the main gate of the Indian Gurkha selection depot. It was 1st June, and the sun had not yet risen. In an area of open grassland, in the dim light of dawn, stood several long lines of boys being kept in file by a number of Gurkha NCOs. Joining them, I waited as the recruiting officer and his aide walked along the lines, running his eye over the expectant candidates. Every so often he would jerk his thumb at a boy, whom his aide then directed to step aside; these were the possible. Some pairs of boys in the line were noticeably brothers, and the suspense as the officer looked at each of them in turn before choosing neither, both, or only one of them, was excruciating. It felt some relief to be excluded from this part of the process, having already passed my village selection. Instead my name was called out from a list and I joined a separate group, who would now wait while those just picked out were given their initial assessments.

A few hours hour later we were taken across to a basic running track. There was no warm up; the heats lined up, an NCO shouted 'Go!' and we were off. I had been practising running, but had little experience of racing. This was middle distance, with several laps of the grass track to perform. I had bought some special Chinese style canvas shoes for the purpose. Though not a star performer, I did well enough to stay in the selection. The race was followed up with some chinning the bar and sit- ups. At 10 a.m. came a break for the first meal of the day, a small serving of chapatti and vegetables, and afterwards some educational tests, none too difficult.

The following day after medical tests I was informed I had passed everything else so far. This was exciting news; it really looked like I was in with a chance now. I waited nervously for the final confirmation of a serial number, and to be notified of the battalion I would be joining. Just as these were about to be issued however, I was informed a signal had been received from Benarus 39 GTC (Gurkha Training Centre, shared between the 3rd and 9th Gurkha Rifles) advising that all vacancies in my intended regiment had now been filled. I was to return in a month's time and await 39 GTC's decision. I was disappointed and frustrated, but overriding these feelings was a sense of joy and relief. If I had joined up now I would have gone straight off into the army and not seen home for another three years. As it was I could now go back for a few weeks and see my father. He had not been well when I left, and I looked forward to seeing him smile again on my return, hearing his voice and chatting with him about my experiences at Gorakhpur.

On arriving back at my village, I was walking up towards the house when a relative who lived near to us approached me. He had a sad look on his face as he spoke to me. He said he was very sorry to have to tell me that while I had been gone my

father had passed away. Saying nothing I stared in the direction of my home. Strangely I felt almost no emotion. I turned the thought over in my head, trying to make sense of it, and what the man's words meant, but it did not seem real. Then as I approached the house, I saw in the distance some white shapes hanging up. These were the white, un-sewn sheets traditionally worn by the sons and wife of a deceased person. It was at this point the realisation my father had left this world hit me. Now for the first time, I felt truly heartbroken. The feelings surged within me like the bursting of a dam and I was overwhelmed by the shock and horror that comes with the death of a loved one. I felt appalled I had not been with him at the end, knowing he would have yearned for me at his side in his final hours. The fact I had said no last farewell to him cut like a knife. I simply could not accept I would never see my beloved father again, and did not know what to do with myself, or how to ease the pain of my grief.

In Nepal there is no interval between death and disposal of the body; once a person has died they must be either buried or cremated immediately, and my father had already been cremated, and there was nothing left of him but my memory of our last meeting. The Hindu mourning ritual however, which lasts for thirteen days was still underway. These observances are the sending of the departed soul to Heaven, during which time the sons must shave their heads, wear the un-sewn white sheets, and remain segregated from the rest of the family. They must cook and eat their own food separately and are forbidden to sleep on their beds, only on straw mattresses on the floor. The priest visits each day to read from the Puran, the Hindu holy text.

When the period of mourning my father was over, there came the difficult task of thinking about the future. My heart still heavy, and feeling at a loss I set off for the second time on the road to Gorakhpur. As before there were aptitude tests and a further medical assessment, all of which I completed successfully. Then once again I waited, and once again the signal came from 39 Gurkha Training Centre that there were no vacancies. Before leaving again I saw some guys who had applied alongside me already kitted out in uniform to begin their training. They were all of a different caste to me. I felt sad and humiliated. I knew I could always apply again the following month, and the month after that if need be. But for how long could I reasonably go on trying? As the bus ground its way over the long dusty road home, I thought about whether I really wanted to be like those who attended selection time after time, lining up patiently, fit, strong, able boys willing to give their all and risk their lives for the army, only to be rejected by a hidden agenda. After much soul searching I decided I did not. We could not survive forever on the hope the army might change its mind. There remained the question of how to support my mother and help my siblings, for which another way would have to be found.

Back in the village I went to see my stepbrother. He had spent some years abroad, studying in the UK where he had received a degree. Now back in Nepal, he was a manager for an animal feed factory. He told me there was a job in his firm, but only unskilled labouring. So I began my first paid employment, reporting to the factory each day at around noon. By working this later shift I could fit in some part-time further education beforehand, rising around 4.30 a.m. to do a spot of running, before arriving at college at 6 a.m. for a business studies course until 11. Throughout these long days of work and study, I did wonder if it was all worth it. My low wages were not sufficient

for the family, but in reality I was lucky. Nepal had few jobs even for the educated, and the prospects of any improvement in the near future seemed very limited.

I was now almost eighteen. The weeks went by in a routine way, with most of my time spent at the college and the factory. Then one day an annual event that always caused a great stir in our community was announced: the Gallawallah, the recruiting officer for the Brigade of Gurkhas of the British Army was due to arrive in the village. I did not have to think too hard about whether or not to go along. Consciously or otherwise I had decided some time ago I must try again, for my father's sake to become a Gurkha. Arriving at the selection field I found some seventy to eighty other boys had turned up. Of these it was thought about ten would be picked to go on to the larger, Area selection, or Phase Two. I could honestly say that at the outset I was holding out little hope. Then at the end I was surprised again to hear my name called out. Could it be possible that I actually stood a chance with the British Gurkhas? After the initial disbelief my confidence began to rise by several notches. The two things I had thought would count against me – caste and physical type had, so far at least been overlooked. I now had a month to wait before attending Phase Two, and spent the days keyed up and focused on the idea of succeeding

Phase Two, ARO (Area Recruiting Officer) selection, was held in a nearby district centre, with three Gallawallahs each bringing one hundred and fifty applicants from different villages. After a half day walk to reach the centre there followed more tests – not running but strength, sit-ups, chins etc, and a slightly more rigorous assessment of educational levels. At the end of three days the examiners, retired Gurkha officers, would announce those eligible to go on to the next stage, for which, of the four hundred and fifty present, forty five would be

chosen. Listening intently as the list of names was called, once again I heard my own. Given a written pass to take to Phase Three in Pokhara in just over a month's time, the waiting game resumed. I applied myself to some serious training – running, improving upper body strength with chins, push-ups and pull-ups. Nutrition being important for strength and body weight, I started each day by downing a glass of milk with a couple of raw eggs, free range, as they all were in the villages of Nepal.

Pokhara was further to travel, a six or seven-hour walk to the bus stop, then two hours on the road before arriving in the distant shadow of the snow-capped slopes of Annapurna and Machapuchhre, the latter known for its shape as the fishtail. The candidates assembled had now swelled to around eight hundred, the best from various districts of Western Nepal. We were to stay here for three weeks, after which the best of the best would be chosen, and we would find out which of us would be joining the Gurkhas, and which going home. It was make or break time.

We were put up in brick built barracks, grouped with those from the same district, sleeping Nepalese style on the floor. A nominated Gurujee would lead us out each day to the various tests and exercises – the British Army Basic Fitness Test plus running, multiple dips, chins and sit-ups again, along with assault courses. With no boots or special footwear provided I did everything in the flat Chinese-style canvas shoes I had arrived in. Whilst the tests themselves were familiar the competition was here much greater, the level of strength and endurance required in each probably rather above average. When chinning the bar for example, the selectors were looking for boys that could perform at least fifteen repetitions, for sit-ups a hundred, preferably two hundred, all on an inclined bench, just to stay in. Tests of balance and agility included squatting slowly down on one leg, the other extended like a Russian dancer,

excruciating for any length of time. Then there were walking tests, which sounded pointless, but enabled selectors to observe the candidate's sense of balance, the proper flow and alignment of his body in motion.

Perhaps the best known feature of Gurkha selection, and for outsiders the most arduous-sounding of it's physical trials, was the legendary Doko Race. In Pokhara the candidates lined up along the river, preparing to run a three-mile course winding through paddy fields, and up and down tortuously steep steps cut into the surrounding hills. This was no ordinary cross country run though, for across his shoulders each boy bore a Doko, a traditional woven basket, held in place by a head strap and the runner's hands, and filled with twenty-five kilos of rocks. Candidates had to complete the course, carrying the heavily laden Doko all the way, within forty-eight minutes to remain in the selection. Though this race was every bit as hard as it sounded, for most Nepalese hill boys raised to work the land, it was not an unusual form of exercise. As I heaved my Doko of rocks past the various medics, recruiters and other spectators lining the route, I felt confident I would complete in the required forty-eight minutes at least. The majority did so that day, and I came in somewhere in the middle. Each boy's time was recorded at the finish however, and I realised that one's position could make a difference in the selection. While my Doko was quickly taken off me and weighed to ensure I had not slyly ditched any of the rocks on route, I took the bread and chicken soup being handed out and ate hungrily.

More medicals followed, with blood pressure, ears, eyesight, weight and chest measurements all tested, examined and noted down. There was one thing I was particularly worried about: two mandatory requirements for joining the Gurkhas were a minimum height of 5' 2" and minimum weight of 50 kilograms.

Height was not a problem, but my weight was hovering between 48 and 49 kg. After doing so well in the most demanding of physical tests, it would be heartbreaking if the reading on the scales were to send me back home. As the day of the weigh-in drew near I noticed the Gurujee from our barracks looking at me, and had a sinking feeling he was sizing me up already; with his experienced eye I thought, he could probably tell at a glance if a boy was underweight.

When the crucial moment arrived and we were lining up to be weighed, the Gurujee approached; was he going to warn me to prepare for disappointment now I wondered? To my surprise he produced a bunch of bananas and urged me to eat some, then did likewise to some of the other boys. I understood immediately and quickly consumed several of the fruit. When my turn came I sat on the British Army scales and watched the needle anxiously. It swung quickly up to 52 kg, teetered there for a second then dropped sharply back to 48. When the apparatus had steadied, it settled finally on the 50kg mark. The officer recorded the weight against my name and I leapt off the scales elated, and immensely grateful to the Gurujee and his bananas.

Written on our bare chests in marker ink was a candidate number, which had to stay on as long as you remained in the selection. If your number faded or smudged someone would soon come up and ink it in again. Having passed the weigh-in I was now hopeful the rest was a formality, and soon would come a serial number. Some slightly more advanced maths and English tests were succeeded by a number of interviews, conducted first by an ex-Gurkha officer then a British officer. They asked me why I wanted to join up. What could I say that sounded right I thought, apart from wanting to serve the Queen and help the British Army? The next question was: 'But what

can you do – you're just a young boy, with no knowledge or experience?' I could not recall my exact response, only that I shrugged my shoulders, but it seemed to satisfy the interviewer.

Finally everyone was summoned to a parade. The big day had arrived when each boy would learn whether or not he had been selected to serve in the British Gurkhas. It was thought around a hundred and fifty would be chosen which, looking around at the expectant faces was about one in eight of us. The DRO (Depot Recruiting Officer), a British Gurkha Lieutenant Colonel began reading from his list while we all sat in rank and file. I had counted something like fifteen names before I heard my own. Jubilantly I called out, 'Yes Sahib!' and moved off to join those already called. From that moment I immediately began to think that the British Army selection process was fairer and more impartial than I had assumed!

There were a few days in Pokhara for the recruits, while uniforms and kit were arranged. Already there were new experiences for us to get used to – showers every day as opposed to once a week, and lessons in how to use a knife and fork at mealtimes rather than the Nepalese way of eating with the hand. Each evening there was an interval when recruits could meet with visiting close relatives and friends. My mother and a friend of mine from the village travelled in to see me and wish me well. An Attestation Parade took place and an oath of allegiance was read out, which we all had to repeat and touch the British flag. I was now new recruit number 2116**** of the Brigade of Gurkhas.

The time had come to depart. I would not see my family for the next three years. My mother put a garland of flowers around my neck. She was full of relief, pride and sadness as she kissed me farewell. My father the Subedar had passed away, and I had become a soldier. It was an end and a beginning.

3. The Adventure Begins!

The first part of my journey as a new recruit was to be taken from Pokhara in a hired military bus to Kathmandu. It was the first time I had seen the capital of my own country. We were told there would be a few days to wait here, after which we would be flown to the British Colony of Hong Kong to begin our basic training as Gurkhas.

I was one of about seventy-five of the company intake of a hundred and fifty men from Pokhara in West Nepal, the other half from Pokhara would follow on once we had been airlifted, since there was not sufficient accommodation for all. Another company of a hundred and fifty from the Dharan selection centre in East Nepal would also come in two waves. Those of us in '2 Company' all had even serial numbers, and '1 Company' odd numbers. The intake of a particular year would all have similar numbers, and your contemporaries were known as your 'numberees'. In Nepalese culture it was considered impolite to address a person by their first name, other than a close friend. Instead, the terms Dai (Big brother) would be used to address someone older than yourself, and Bhai (little brother) for someone younger. The custom in the Gurkhas was to talk to one another other using numbers, e.g. 'Hello 50.'

Whilst in Kathmandu my numberees and I took the opportunity to visit some of the ancient religious places, including the Shiva temple Pashupatinath, and the Buddhist temple of Swayambunath Stupa. For me, the biggest immediate thrill now was the prospect of flying. The only aeroplanes I had

seen before were light aircraft passing high in the sky above my village. Arriving at the airport on the day of departure, I stared at the huge plane and felt a great surge of excitement, and a sense of adventure about the whole new life that lay ahead of me. Kitted out and in uniform, we felt almost like proper soldiers, though as yet with no weapons. We had no passports yet either, these would only be issued at the end of training, nine months on. There was no need for ID. Unlike civilian passengers we did not wait in line at security and check-in desks. Instead about a hundred of us including instructors were simply herded through the gate and across the runway.

Seeing the huge plane at close quarters, the sense of a momentous occasion hit me again. We were going! Reaching the top of the steps, each man touched his forehead then laid the same hand briefly on the metal body of the aircraft before boarding, a Nepalese ritual before embarking on a journey. Seat belts on, the plane taxied for a few moments before the engines roared and we raced forward at tremendous speed, there was a slight jolt and suddenly we were airborne. I gazed down in wonder at the city of Kathmandu and my homeland of Nepal, the buildings and hills dwindling away until miniature then disappearing, until all that was below us were clouds. I thought of my mum and my sisters and brother at the house or at school, and the familiar things they might be doing in the village right now. Meanwhile the aeroplane lifted us steadily to 30,000 feet, heading for the South China Sea.

In flight we received prepared meals along with a knife and fork, which caused some amusement; despite the preliminary lessons most of us were still finding the Western way of eating rather strange. From Kathmandu we touched down at Calcutta for a tedious two-hour wait on the runway, before continuing on eastwards. It was the early hours of the following morning

when the plane began its descent into Hong Kong's Kai Tak airport. Being dark we had little sense of where we were. Once aboard the military bus and en route to the training camp, with the dawn breaking we began to look around. I was awe-struck by the glittering, high-rise buildings that towered everywhere, and the bustle and speed - cars, trucks, bicycles and people all in a constant, headlong rush to get somewhere.

TDBG (Training Depot Brigade of Gurkhas) was located in Sek Kong, a relatively rural part of the colony in the North Territory - the southern-most tip of what had been the Chinese mainland until coming under British control after the First Opium War in 1842. TDBG was formed up of two companies of recruits, then alongside us was 'Courses Division' in which junior and senior NCOs would be undergoing career training with a view to promotion. Junior NCOs would take part in Section Commander Battle Courses and Senior NCOs in Platoon Sergeant Battle Courses. There was also a Drill Wing, running Drill courses for both junior and senior NCOs from across the Brigade of Gurkhas. Additionally a PT (Physical Training) Wing ran courses for PT instructors. (These courses and teams mirrored, on a smaller scale the British Army training in Brecon, Pirbright and Aldershot in the UK)

On the first night we met up with the guys from East Nepal, already arrived on a separate flight. In the interests of integration, the two companies each comprised a roughly equal number of recruits from both East and West Nepal. Up until five or six years previously, there had been no such integration, and recruits from each geographical region would be taken into particular regiments and stay with them exclusively. When the Brigade was larger this segregation was less important, and each regiment thrived on its distinct identity with a sense of pride. After the Brigade began to shrink in numbers, the

regiments found themselves working alongside one another, and, with separate regional languages, the divide could be a problem. For example Gurung and Magar from West Nepal, and Rai and Limbu from the East, the dominant castes within the Brigade of Gurkhas, would tend to converse in their own tongues, and not be able to understand each other, unless they used the national and common language of Nepalese. Thus there was now felt a need to combine the regions from the start of training. Each company was divided into two wings. In each wing there were two platoons, these comprised three sections, and each section was made up of eleven or twelve men.

Over the first few days we were familiarised with the camp and more kit and equipment was issued. This included something new to me, and some of my numberees – a pair of boots. In Nepal I had worn nothing but bare feet or flip-flops. Putting on the heavy army 'high combat' boots felt like two lead weights on the end of my feet. Each recruit also received a wooden stick, about the length and diameter of a pickaxe handle. We were instructed to place this behind the neck then loop our arms over it at each side, rather like a yoke. The purpose of the stick was to encourage upright posture, with chest out, head up, stomach in and shoulders back. Throughout the day, whether going to the cookhouse or the washrooms, on or off parade, each man had to carry his stick in this fashion, presumably so that by the time our real arms were issued, we would already have the military bearing to carry them. The only one not carrying a stick was the instructor who led us around everywhere. If an officer passed by we had to salute smartly, not with the hand (the stick in place obviously made that difficult) but by making a sharp 'eyes right' or 'eyes left' towards him.

Another kind of induction procedure awaited us, which though quicker to administer was more unpleasant, with some nasty after-effects. It came in the form of a mug of water into which was dissolved a white powder. At one of the evening briefing sessions we were issued with this mixture, told to swill it around the mug and then drink the whole lot down. It tasted foul. This medicine was compulsory for every new Gurkha recruit to purge the system of parasites. The eating of undercooked meat among some Nepalese was known to cause tapeworms, and to eradicate any such problems from day one, all were given the same treatment. Most, myself included, experienced a few days of sickness and diarrhoea afterwards.

Once the two companies had been settled in, the training began. This consisted of standard physical exercises – marching with weights, drill parades and, once rifles were issued, weapons drills. Our khukuri knives had been issued soon after arrival, and their use in a close combat role and trench fighting was taught in separate lessons. The khukuri received the same intensive cleaning and polishing routine as boots, and ironing of uniforms, which took up most of our Sundays. The khukuri blade was cleaned by wire wool held between two planks of wood, applying liquid Brasso then rubbing until it shined. Initially this took hours, but got easier with practice. During officers' inspections and official visits the section commander would give the order 'Prepare for khukuri inspection' then 'khukuri draw!' followed by 'Khu – kuri!' when we would stand to attention with the khukuri held blade upwards at waist height. As the officer passed by, each man gave his blade a slight twist to show it was flawless and gleaming on both sides.

Other combat training consisted of close quarter battles, section battle-drills and platoon battle drills. This training progressed up to company level war fighting skills, involving

defensive and offensive operations. There were some surprises in store. During one exercise we were ordered after dark to go on fighting patrol and take out an enemy position. Giving directions, the platoon commander, one of our instructors, led us along a narrow, winding footpath. Some men had IWS (Individual Weapon Sights), which in those days were heavy and cumbersome, fixed on their self-loading rifles, while others had to make their way in the gloom. As we proceeded, what had seemed like sparse shrubbery turned into dense under growth. About halfway between base and our given objective, there was a sudden blaze of light, accompanied by the loud crackle of machinegun fire then rifle shots. We had stumbled right into an ambush.

A trip flare – either stumbled across by one of our group or set off by the enemy had the intended effect of clearly illuminating us, while we could see little in the glare. Amid the initial chaos and confusion of the young recruits, our platoon and section commanders shouted orders to counter-attack. For most of us it was too late, and in the ensuing war game we were ordered to lie down. There had been a lesson for everyone involved; for us, expect the unexpected, and for the opposing platoon some training in ambush technique. On this occasion, it was our instructors who decided who had been hit with a blank round; in later training we wore a device that bleeped when successfully targeted by a simulated weapon.

All the training was given by our Gurkha instructors, although simple English – basic conversation, reading and writing were taught by civilian English teachers. Words of command on the parade ground and orders for the battlefield were issued in English – e.g. 'Two Section – STAAAND READY!' 'Number Two Section - 'STAAAND AT EASE!' were spoken in English, with the finer details in Nepali. I found everything interesting

and exciting – learning new skills and the thrill of simply being in the army kept me motivated, and the first few months passed quickly.

At about the halfway point of our nine-month training, there was a break for some R and R (Rest and Recuperation) including a guided tour of Hong Kong. At Ocean Park I was fascinated by the cable cars running up and down the mountainside, likewise the dolphins and killer whales swimming so close. Another remarkable new experience was seeing the ocean itself. Here I was stood on the edge of the South China Sea, near enough to touch it.

The R and R period over, training recommenced in earnest, and it was from here on that life in the camp began to seem both dull and arduous. The training itself was tough and gruelling. The weather in Hong Kong veered between either a dry heat, exhausting on a route march and during exercises, or wet, and much of our kit turned out not to be waterproof. Trudging across fields in sodden uniform, carrying a soaking sleeping bag for days on end was a miserable experience. Sport was played intensively, with competitions running at every level from inter-section to inter-company. I was fairly fit, and had a little knowledge of volleyball, but not of the skills and rules of basketball and football, which were second nature to the many recruits who were sons of ex-Gurkhas in Hong Kong.

Having no previous proximity to the sea, rivers or lakes, I could not swim. Now, at the age of eighteen I was required to learn within nine months. Most recruits, myself included were finding the swimming very difficult, and for some the water was so alien they did not want to go near it. The swimming periods consisted mostly of forcing boys into the pool and urging them to splash out and learn, rather than structured lessons. Some

of my numberees, knowing they had a swimming session the following day found it hard to sleep, even having nightmares about what was to come.

As new recruits we were never allowed outside the camp apart from training and escorted R and R. Perhaps our superiors felt we might get lost in a world so unknown to us. Social life consisted of 'messing' evenings, when the section or platoon would enjoy a few soft drinks (beers were strictly for instructors only) and cook a Nepalese supper together. These nights could be quite fun, wild even, with much laughter. Since our company comprised guys from both East and West Nepal, this was a chance to get to know each other, and share our respective cultures through songs, and the traditional Nepalese dance the Jhyaure. Each platoon had their own Madal, a bongo-type drum of hollowed wood hung around the neck, a bamboo flute and other traditional musical instruments.

Other entertainment was to be found in the guardroom. I had never seen television in Nepal, and when I first noticed the TV set standing in the corner, I had thought it was simply for playing videos. This was 1986, and the football World Cup – something I had vaguely heard about – was a hot topic among some, mainly those with Gurkha relatives in the colony and familiar with all the big events. All the talk was of Argentina and Maradona, and the handball he had claimed as 'the hand of God'. But what amazed me was when some of the guys started talking about watching the games 'live'. Until then I had no idea that events on the other side of the world could be watched on a TV screen, as they happened. To me this seemed like magic.

These diversions aside there was still a sense of confinement. Unlike many other regiments there was no provision for female company at dances or other mixed gatherings. Colleagues

who were the sons of Gurkhas or had other kinfolk in Hong Kong were permitted visits from them. This made me sad and slightly envious. Missing my own mum and brother and sisters, as well as my dear departed father, I experienced for the first time the pain of homesickness. The thought of not seeing my family for almost another three years seemed a lonely prospect. There were letters of course, restricted to relatives and other approved correspondents, and often screened. Correspondence from girlfriends was not allowed; when post arrived for you the instructor would often ask if you knew the sender before letting you have your letter. Probably the official view was that romantic attachments could take a recruit's eye off the target, and compromise his commitment to serving the army. Possibly this was also why we weren't allowed off the camp on our own, keeping temptation out of reach.

The grinding routine of exercise and training, pushing every man to the limit, continued day after day, with the relief of the weekends barely long enough to recover our strength before the forced marching, PT and intensive, repetitive drills kicked off all over again. It was some comfort to see I wasn't the only one finding it hard going, and sometimes on the verge of giving up. Occasionally an exhausted recruit would get to the point of telling their instructor they wanted to leave. No one took these requests too seriously, and there was somehow always the sense that if a boy were to be sent home, the shame of having failed would make him even more miserable. To knuckle down and get on with it was the only way. In fact recruits very rarely complained. For a start there was no system of appeal; anyone could be dismissed without explanation or notice. Then there was the law of supply and demand, of which we were often

reminded: 'If you don't want to stay, there are a hundred boys in Nepal waiting to take your place.' Having all been through selection we knew this was no exaggeration.

Awareness of one's caste was always present, together with a measure of disapproval among some of the other recruits and Gurkha training staff. This was rarely overt, and confined to the occasional comment about my being a Thakuri – the caste of the Nepalese Royal Family. I had no association whatsoever with royalty, but some people simply didn't like mixing with other castes, especially those not usually represented in the Brigade. 'Why did you want to join the Gurkhas?' they would ask. The question was rhetorical, just to let me know they felt I shouldn't really be there. This attitude of mild resentment – veiled, unofficial and hard to put a finger on – was to resurface throughout my career. But despite these minor brushes, and the homesickness, overall I had no excuse or inclination to feel sorry for myself. I had signed up and knew I must make the most of the opportunities the army had given me. The majority of the guys were friendly, and my instructor a very fair-minded, encouraging man, who never treated me as different from the others in any way.

Since our farm animals in Nepal were domesticated, I had never hunted and had no experience of guns. The same went for most of the other recruits, so whereas in sports competitions I was struggling to catch up, when it came to shooting I was on an equal footing. After learning the basics of rifle drill, we began firing at fixed targets then moved on to the 'pop-up' ranges, where shapes would appear in random sequences and positions. I quickly found a natural aptitude here, particularly in 'grouping' – shooting as part of a small team – and 'march and shoot' exercises. We held our own competitions with soft drinks for prizes, which I began winning frequently. Shooting

became my strong point, and when I emerged top in my platoon my reputation among my peers was established. Skills in other areas soon followed suit, including learning to swim.

My immediate superior was pleased and supportive of my success, and that of all the recruits. There was encouragement from all ranks, with the blood curdling battle cry of 'We are the Gurkhas, we are the best!' and our platoon commander's pep talk: 'You all eat in the same cookhouse – if others can do things, you can do them too, and perhaps better.' Another of his proverbs was, 'If you're going to dive in the sea, make sure you come up with the pearl.' I had dived in and joined the Brigade of Gurkhas, and after nine months of training I did feel I had something of real value, to myself and to the army. My focus now, apart from securing a better life for myself and for my family, was on becoming a good fighting soldier.

With my time as a recruit coming to an end I received some sad news from home; my stepmother, my father's first wife had passed away from old age. It had in fact happened some months previously, but my family had kept the information from me until now lest it had affected my training. For the same reason they had withheld the tragic report that one of my stepbrothers had been killed in Nepal in a road accident. I remembered his kindness to me as a child. To have been taken so suddenly and randomly, and relatively young, must have been very hard for his poor family to bear. I felt very sad for them. It was also a reminder to count one's blessings, appreciate that life was a precious gift, with each day given in this world to be valued, and to spend the time wisely.

4. Hello Johnny! A British Welcome

Our flight from Hong Kong had begun its descent into Heathrow. I was looking forward to seeing the country I had learned so much about in my school history lessons on the Industrial Revolution, the home of Queen Elizabeth, whom I had sworn in my Oath of Allegiance to serve and defend. In previous generations, through the two World Wars and subsequent deployments around the globe, many Gurkhas, including some of my own gurujees from non-infantry battalions, had served their entire careers in the British Army without once seeing Britain. We were luckier. As the plane dropped another few feet I peered eagerly through the window for my first glimpse of Britain. Nothing could be seen. The ground below was covered in thick fog.

Along with thirty-nine colleagues from my year's intake, I was now a soldier in the 2/2 GR (2nd Battalion 2nd King Edward V11 Own Gurkha Rifles, or Sirmoor Rifles as first called on their formation in 1815). I was thrilled to have been put in 2/2 GR, not least because of its distinguished history. The Sirmoor's reputation for military prowess and fierce determination began to be forged during the days of the British East India Company, when, in 1824 they were called in to deal with one of the notorious armed gangs of bandits known as dacoits, which had been robbing and murdering people in the vicinity of Koonja. The Sirmoor Battalion, some thirty-six miles away at the time, marched on foot, covering the distance in twelve hours. On arrival they found the vicious dacoits holed

up in Koonja Fort, and reckoned to be around eight hundred strong, to the Sirmoor's three hundred and fifty men. Moreover the fort, its surrounding walls well over twenty feet high, was believed to be impregnable. The Sirmoors however had other ideas. They selected a nearby sturdy tree, and (probably using their khukuris) swiftly hacked it down and turned it into a battering ram with which they proceeded to smash down the massive gates of the fort. Once inside, the Gurkhas' khukuris were quickly turned to another use, and in fierce close quarter fighting over a hundred and fifty of the dacoits were killed. To mark the Sirmoor success in battering their way into Koonja, the symbol of a ram's head was struck in silver as a uniform accoutrement, seen today on the officers' whistle chains.

Greater achievements for the Sirmoor were to follow, most notably during the Indian Mutiny of 1857. The powder keg for the great rebellion among the Indian infantrymen, or Sepoys as they were known, had already been primed by a growing estrangement between the British and Indians, with mixed race marriages frowned on, attempts to spread Christianity among the Hindus and Muslims, and Bengal soldiers' allowances being cut, among the Indians' resentments. The spark generally thought to have lit the fuse of outright rebellion was the issue of new Enfield rifles, specifically the cartridges, the paper casings of which had to be bitten off prior loading The Sepoys refused to comply because the cartridges were rumoured to be greased with pork or beef fat, and as pork is haram (not allowed) to Muslims and cow sacred to Hindus, it forbade men from either group to 'bite the bullet.'

When the first mutiny broke out in Meerut in May of 1857, five hundred of the Sirmoor Battalion began to march the one hundred miles there, each man carrying sixty rounds, with further ammunition on two elephants. Meanwhile, with reports

of large numbers of deserters from the Bengali Army marching on Delhi, the Sirmoors were ordered to change course, and engaged them at Badi-Ki-Serai. The mutineers retreated into Delhi where, joined by disaffected Sepoys from other areas, their ranks swelled, soon outnumbering the three to four thousand strong British including the Sirmoor Battalion. The British now took up position on a ridgeline outside the city, where they came under repeated counter attack from the mutineers, both infantry and artillery. Fiercest fighting took place at the vital position of Hindu Rao's House, which they succeeded in holding.

Similar scenes were unfolding in other northern Indian cities, with the shortage of British troops making the contributions of the few loyal native regiments crucial. By August the Sirmoor Battalion outside Delhi had lost half its men in the three-month siege, either from cholera or wounds, but still the ridge was held. When reinforcements finally arrived in mid-September, the remaining Sirmoors joined a gallant assault, which, after six days of vicious fighting, finally vanquished the mutineers and regained the city for the British. The struggle was not thought to have been pretty, with little quarter given, but the reputation of the Gurkhas for loyalty, endurance and courage, as well as ferocity when required, was established. The Gurkhas had also fought side by side with the British 60th Rifles, in terrible conditions, and the experience at Delhi had instilled in both races, though neither could speak the other's language, a deep feeling of mutual respect. In further recognition of their deeds at Delhi, the Sirmoors were henceforth known as Riflemen rather than Sepoys. Queen Victoria also designed a special award for the battalion, known as The Queen's Truncheon, commemorating their gallantry in the Indian Mutiny.

By the time I joined, the Brigade of Gurkhas rotated its soldiers between three locations: Hong Kong, Brunei and Britain. A big difference to the soldier was in his wallet; the salary of those based in Hong Kong being about a fifth of that paid while in the UK. Brunei pay was above Hong Kong's, but not much. As soon as you were transferred from Hong Kong or Brunei to Britain your pay went up – and dropped again immediately you left.

When the bus picked us up outside the airport the fog still lay thickly all around, and there was little to see as we drove off. Some two hours later, arriving at 2/2 GR base in Church Crookham near Aldershot, known then as the 'Home of the British Army' the fog was still with us. It also seemed extremely cold. The following day I was surprised it did not get light until 8 a.m. and then not properly, as there was no change in the weather. By 4 p.m. it was almost completely dark again. It was very different to Nepal, where I had never felt such cold. My home village, like Pokhara and Kathmandu, was situated some way below the snow line, which starts at 5,000 to 5,500 metres (16,404 to 18,045 ft.). When the cold and fog persisted on the third day, I asked one of my gurujees (the name for any Gurkha who joined up before you) if it was always like this in the UK. He assured me that English summers brought many days of sunshine, though often a lot of rain too.

At the Battalion Reception Ceremony, to welcome the thirty-nine of us who had just arrived, the British Commanding Officer gave a short talk on 2/2 GR including the famous Battle of Delhi. The RSM followed up with a briefing re regulations and discipline. Although the environment here felt more mature than during training, our movements were still to be quite strictly controlled, with return to barracks by 11 p.m. every night and no absence without written permission from

our OC (Officer Commanding – as distinct from Commanding Officer). For Gurkhas going into the civilian community the dress code for junior ranks was white shirt, grey trousers, green blazer, regimental tie and polished black 'Highland' shoes. In summer the blazer could be left off, but never the tie. This 'mufti' was obligatory at all times when off the base. The RSM also went through the 'compliments' or order of respect, and who to salute - which was all officers. Our warrant officers and officers, both British and Gurkha, we addressed as 'Sahib'.

We received a warm welcome from the British soldiers of other ranks, who on seeing a Gurkha face immediately gave a cheery grin and loud cry of 'Hello Johnny!' Otherwise there was little verbal communication with the Brits, and though we knew and spoke English, colloquial nuances and certain words and usages went over our heads. This could cause confusion, and sometimes amusement when the Gurkhas ventured into town. One familiar story was of the Gurkha who called at a house and surprised the occupants by asking to use the toilet. He had misread the 'To Let' sign outside. Then there was the noodles yarn; in Hong Kong noodles were known as 'mei' (pronounced 'me') so a Gurkha newly arrived in Britain asks a shopkeeper if he is familiar with the product: 'Do you know mei?' he asks innocently. The shopkeeper wishing to be friendly replies, 'Yes, I know you.' 'No, no,' insists the Gurkha, repeating his question, 'do you know me?' At this point the shopkeeper suspects he is being made fun of and says exasperatedly: 'Yes, I know you - you're a f****** Gurkha!' The young soldier walks out bemused.

During the Christmas leave some of my gurujees took me with them on a trip, via London to Edinburgh. The main purpose was to see something of the British cities, the other to buy some tartan goods, particularly the warm shawls very

popular to take back as gifts for wives, mums, sisters and others in Nepal. Edinburgh Castle, free to enter for the military, was a huge and impressive fortification, though I had no idea of its history. London and Edinburgh were full of bright colourful Christmas decorations, though again I did not understand their significance at the time. Our equivalent Nepalese festival was Dashain, the date for the celebration varying slightly each year according to the Hindu calendar, falling around the end of September or beginning of October.

Just after Christmas I was assigned my first guard duty on the rear gate of the base. That night there was a blizzard. I had never seen snow before, or felt its effects. In the open sentry box, with the wind whipping my face and hands through thin leather gloves and ice forming on my boots, I felt I was going to freeze solid. The duty lasted only two hours, but by the end my body was numb. The snow finally dispersed and the sun did shine for periods, but temperatures remained low. Our CO used the cold as an opportunity to get us to peak performance. For PT he ordered every man to wear army issue black shorts or TML trousers and red and white T-shirts, but no sweatshirts or tracksuits. Seeing us sweat, he reasoned, was assurance we were working hard enough, and sure enough most of us ran and worked up a sweat just to get warm. It worked for me; within a couple of months of arriving in the unit I had entered the Fleet half marathon alongside local civilians.

Familiarisation training covered AFV (Armoured Fighting Vehicles) and aircraft reconnaissance. The Cold War was still on, and lessons focused mainly on defensive battles and NBC (Nuclear, Biological and Chemical) attacks from the Soviets. After two months my company were assigned to run in the Junior Leadership Cadre for the Battalion. The cadre was taking place over six weeks at Salisbury Plain, and those who

did well were considered for promotion. The cadre was for Gurkhas who had joined the regiment five years previously, the '81 intake. We would play their enemy in the various drills and war games, and learn from them in the process. It was the first opportunity for us to train as a company group, rather than by direct instruction, and a chance to get to know some colleagues who had actual experience of warfare.

The training and assessment for the cadre was highly focused, and though learning much, I also realised there was still a lot for a young rifleman like me to master. The effect was to spur me on. When first selected for the Gurkhas I was pleased simply to have got in. Now seeing the promotion system, and realising there were opportunities for progressing up a career ladder in the British Army, I began to feel more ambitious about what I might achieve. I recalled how my father had risen to the rank of Subedar. If I could do as much for our family I thought, then looking down from Heaven, how proud my dad would be.

The English weather continued to catch me off-guard. On one overnight exercise during the cadre, I took off my boots and left them outside the tent. Next morning they were frozen and heavy as lead. I had to put them on in this condition and set off immediately on a route march. After that I slept with my boots on and looked forward to my first English summer. I was not however destined to see one just yet. At this time the Gurkha units were rotated regularly, and come early spring it was time to pack our kit for an arms plot move back to Hong Kong.

Our plane touched down in the colony again, and when our next month's salary was paid in cash, drilling before the Coy 2 IC, it too had taken a nosedive. One way for those in Hong Kong or Brunei to earn a lot more was to have a wife, since all married Gurkhas received almost the UK pay rate. However I

was not yet thinking of marriage. It would be almost impossible on my own initiative anyway, as what follows will explain. It was common for a young Gurkha arriving home on his first leave to receive an introduction to a prospective bride, selected for him by his family. If he felt the girl was unsuitable, another would if possible be offered before his six-months leave was up, but most boys went along with the first choice. It was still two and a half years until my first leave.

The option of seeking a non-Nepalese bride was also impossible; serving Gurkhas were forbidden to marry outside their own race. To do so meant automatic dismissal. The bars and discos of Hong Kong were often frequented by some of the hundreds of Filipino girls working out there, and though officially frowned on, Gurkhas did often enjoy evenings out with them, though had to be back in camp by eleven p.m. unless they had a weekend pass. One did hear rare cases of boys who had fallen in love with a Filipino, Chinese or European girl and wed them, thus being forced, or choosing if you prefer, to leave the army with no pension or entitlements.

More complicated romantic situations could arise out of the Brigade's rules for married Gurkhas in Hong Kong and Brunei, which only allowed their wives to accompany them after a minimum of eight years service. Furthermore, accompanied tours of duty were limited to two and a half years within a fifteen-year period. After fifteen years, those promoted beyond the rank of sergeant (colour-sergeants and above) could have unlimited accompanied tours, though only about thirty percent of the Brigade rose to this level. These restrictions meant large numbers of Gurkhas entering an arranged marriage during their first period of leave, only to be separated from their wives after just six months. With another three years to get through before they could return home again, for some young

Gurkha husbands, human nature proved stronger than Queen's Regulations or their marriage vows, and they ended up going off with another woman, sacrificing their career in the process.

The other route to a better salary was to continue learning and improving, and wherever possible take on more responsibility, which would lead hopefully to advancement. I was already looking ahead two and a half years down the line, when I would be eligible to run in a JLC as a gurujee myself, and compete for the chance of promotion. I resolved over the coming months to enter as many competitions, and volunteer for whatever extra training was available, in order to win a place on the cadre.

A good stepping-stone would be some ERE (Extra Regimental Employment), in particular a posting to Brecon in the UK. Members of 2/2 GR and 10 GR were periodically assigned to ITC (Infantry Training Centre) at Brecon, where British soldiers trained as Section Commanders or Platoon Sergeants, and on other courses. 1/2 GR, 6 GR and 7 GR played similar roles for the RMAS (Royal Military Academy Sandhurst) The Gurkhas' job here was simply to provide manpower for demonstrations, playing enemy etc, but if I could get an ERE to Brecon, the knowledge and skills picked up whilst there would be an invaluable preparation for the leadership cadre. With the higher UK pay I could also start saving.

After disembarking from the plane we were taken to the battalion base at Gallipoli Lines near Fan Ling in NT (Northern Territory). We were to be here for the next four years. Familiarisation training was followed by a routine that included regular patrols of the Hong Kong/China land border, where along a stretch of hills and scrubland of several miles a high fence of razor wire separated the colony from the Chinese mainland. Without the fence it was feared Chinese people would swarm across into Hong Kong in their thousands, fleeing

from authoritarian rule. In previous years the Hong Kong government had operated a 'touch base' policy, allowing those Chinese who succeeded in getting into the colony to remain. As the numbers attempting to cross had swelled however, this had to be abandoned. Plenty still tried their luck. Here and there on the opposite side of the fence could be seen evidence of people hanging around looking for a way over, or through the razor wire – makeshift camps of newspaper, with bowls of noodles and cigarette ends littering the ground, left by those waiting for their chance. When they thought they had found it they would appear with homemade ladders of bamboo, or wire cutters. These attempts were often made at night, and to detect them a series of tall observation posts were situated at intervals along the border, manned by British Army personnel or Hong Kong police officers, equipped with big binoculars and night vision gear of the type then used in Northern Ireland. Motion sensors on the fence would set off an alarm in a central control room, and the police had their own tracker dogs and trucks. For stealth we wore camouflage gear, patrolling on small BMX bikes or hiding in bushes, watching and listening for signs of movement.

Most nights we apprehended at least one II (Illegal Immigrant) and sometimes several. Operational procedure was to handcuff and escort them into the custody of the Hong Kong Police Force. The majority were Chinese males, who could be quite emotional as we took them in. Their only real crime seemed to be that of seeking a better way of life. For many the motivation to escape was heartbreaking, particularly women expectant with a second baby, transgressing their government's strict one child rule. 'Snakeheads' were known to charge hundreds of dollars and more to bring pregnant women over by speedboat, while also picking up electronic goods and cigarettes to sell

back in China. At one time the Hong Kong police were said to be repatriating about eighty illegal Chinese immigrants a day, though many more were thought to get through. At the road crossing, the undersides of lorries were routinely checked with long handled mirrors. The Gurkha and police patrols each kept a tally of how many II they caught in a night or over a week. The company commander was quite competitive about this, and proud of us whenever we scored highest.

The more official regimental sports included football, volleyball, basketball, cross-country running, swimming and shooting. The battalion held sports competitions at inter-company level every year, which then led up to brigade level competitions. Keen to do well, and always with an eye on the approaching Junior Leadership Cadre, I played to my strengths and became intensively involved in running and basketball, representing the battalion in both. The Brigade of Gurkhas also took huge pride in organising the Hong Kong Skill At Arms Meetings (SAAM) the winners of which went on to the UK for the Bisley Army Shooting Competition, another area in which I might do well.

An event less familiar to those outside the army was the Khud Race, in which participants ran straight up then immediately down, a high and very steep hill, well over forty-five degrees. The Hong Kong Khud Race was held at The Nameless Hill. Running up was arduous, coming down such an incline at speed, hazardous, and there were often injuries. The sharp angle of the run-up caused a build-up of lactic acid in the thigh muscles, quickly cramping them during the descent. British officers unused to hill running tended to stumble or slither down on their backsides.

The fastest time recorded for the Khud Race on the Nameless Hill was fifteen minutes. I once managed eighteen, while my good friend Kusang Gurung surpassed this. Subsequently Kusang became a champion hill runner, winning the Mount Kinabalu International Climbathon in Malaysia three consecutive years, 1991-1993. The Climbathon grew into a high profile competition, attracting hundreds of athletes from all over the world to the challenge of scaling 2,250 metres, over a distance of 21 kilometres. There is also a time limit, with those not reaching the peak within 2½ hours, and then from the peak to the finish within 2 hours, automatically disqualified. Alongside Kusang's impressive record, other Gurkhas have excelled in the event, winning first place from 1988 to 1990. The Climbathon has been dubbed 'the world's toughest mountain race' and 'the ultimate test of human endurance'.

Every two years there was a brigade level assessment of our war fighting skills. It included offensive and defensive battle skills at all ranks, sometimes assessed by officers from British battalions who would travel out from the UK. In the event I acquitted myself well enough, though wasn't sure if it would assist towards moving up the ladder. I had been doing whatever else was practicable, volunteering and competing in various sporting competitions, representing the Brigade in outside events such as the Hong Kong Marathon and a charity walk. Most important though were the training placements, to extend one's knowledge and skills outside the unit - extra regimental employment. So far nothing had happened in that direction, and seeing colleagues being granted these opportunities, I was growing despondent. By tradition in the Gurkhas those with the lowest serial numbers were offered first choice of leave

dates, courses, and other concessions. Although being a low numberee, I found the custom had not been observed in my case, rather the reverse.

Miscellaneous perks did not really matter, but courses did. These were by invitation only and so far I had simply not been invited, and from the attitudes and behaviour of certain Gurkha officers it seemed fairly clear my caste was at the root of it. In tests and exercises these people told the instructors who to pass or fail, and their decisions could not be challenged. To those holding the power it was natural that caste looked after caste. This manipulation of the system was rarely overt, but instead pretexts and excuses were used to tip the scales for or against an individual. In the upper echelons the British officers seemed unaware, and any suggestion of favouritism was denied. The enclosed nature of Gurkha life and customs within the battalion, with their own caste language, spoken and unspoken, kept such things cloaked. As long as the system was seen to be efficient at the top and bottom, no one questioned what went on in the middle.

So after two years in Hong Kong I was still marking time, and despite what I considered best efforts going nowhere. Would I ever get as far as my father the Subedar? The thought of his disappointment from on high saddened me. Still missing him, it was with mixed feelings that I anticipated the journey I would soon be making. Three years had almost come round, and I would soon be returning home on my first leave, without my dad there to greet me.

For a serving Gurkha the process of travelling home wasn't quite like going on holiday. Arriving in Kathmandu my military ID and passport were taken off me, to be retained until I flew out again. After a night in the transit camp I climbed aboard the hired bus that dropped the Lahure off at various points along

the dusty, winding Kathmandu-Pokhara road. A conspicuous figure at the roadside in my jeans and fashionable boots bought in Hong Kong, smart new luggage, and a flash looking Yashika camera slung round my neck, I hired one of the waiting porters to help carry my bags the final stage of the journey. The walk took a whole day, following the ancient track along the river to reach my home and family.

5. Tragedy and Travesty

It can be a piquant and nostalgic experience to return to the place one grew up in after a long time away. Drawing closer every sight and sound stirs memories, each step recreating the world of home as it once was, and that in so many ways you would still like it to be. So it was for me walking the old familiar path up the steep hill, past the series of stone resting places with the big shady trees, finally coming in sight of the house. My mum, brother and sisters all came out to greet me.

After three years, though we had exchanged letters, there was much village news to catch up on. Among the topics of conversation over the next few days however, there was no need to talk about marriage, at least not my own. Though many a Lahure could expect a fiancé to be optimistically proffered on his return, I had made it clear to Mum that I was not wishing to marry, or not yet. If my father had still been alive it would have been different. By this time he would have been in his mid-eighties, and to see me married before what would almost certainly have been our last farewell was a special kind of happiness I could not have refused him. My mum on the other hand was still young, and there was plenty of time for her to look forward to and enjoy a wedding.

I had applied for my leave to fall during the festival of Dashain in October, when there would be music and celebrations to enjoy with relatives and friends at home. The predominant castes made their choices first however, and I had been given February. The other thing I regretted was not arriving with

more gifts for my mum, brother and sisters. Lahure back from a long UK tour traditionally came loaded with presents, but on Hong Kong pay of less than £100 a month, even after three years I had simply not had the money. And though the flights were courtesy of the British Army, the six months leave was unpaid.

How to survive financially, both now and in the years to come, was always at the back of my mind. The only way to escape the grinding poverty of Nepal seemed to be to join the Gurkhas, - and this ultimately only for those who rose to become officers – or through education, a road my stepbrother was already on. The need to somehow plan for our own family's future now felt pressing. The last time I had seen my brother he was five years old. Now he was eight, and I was worried about his schooling, whether he would continue to have any. I feared he would spend too much time playing and not learning. The two eldest of my sisters, who I had hoped would continue in secondary school, were now working at home. It was good my mum had their help, but the land and what it could produce was finite, indeed inadequate. In Nepal there was no such thing as jobseeker's allowance, nor any other kind of state benefit; the vast majority of people survived on bartering, growing their own food if they could, or on the support of their families. My job in the army would not be forever, and, unless I received promotion, which was looking increasingly doubtful, it was unlikely to support us all indefinitely.

I decided to speak to my siblings about the issue of education. The eldest of my sisters, now eleven would remain at home and help our mother, the second sister, after some discussion agreed to return to school and continue her studies for a while. I then went to the next village to see a friend who worked in a school there. I told him of my concerns for my young

brother, and asked if there was a possibility he could be taken on at the school. My friend kindly offered to do this favour for our family. It was a day's travel from our home, but being a boarding school my brother could stay there, and my friend would look after him. It was hard for my mum of course to accept having her youngest child, only eight years old, away from home for days or weeks at a time, and though her head told her it was in his best interests, in her heart she must have felt great pain in making the decision.

In August I bid fond farewell to my family and returned to Hong Kong. Back in the battalion my thoughts focused more than ever on the future. My four-year tour in the colony would be up in early 1991, less than eighteen months away. I now thought it unlikely I would get any opportunity to develop my career in the army, either before or after leaving Hong Kong. Somehow though I had to try to stay optimistic. Another dream I had was of one day wearing wings on my uniform, like the boys in the Parachute Regiment - now that would be a proud achievement. As part of a charity event in Hong Kong I had made my first parachute drop. It was a start, and who knows I thought - it might one day lead somewhere.

As the months ticked on, an event of large proportions and great concern to everyone became the talk of the battalion. In 1997 the Crown Colony of Hong Kong, in accordance with the Treaty of 1897 was due to be handed back to China. The impact on the Gurkhas, who had served in large numbers as part of the British Army in Hong Kong for nearly a hundred years, would almost certainly be significant, though to what extent precisely no one yet seemed sure. 1997 seemed a long way off, but plans were soon in hand for the 'draw down' period to begin in 1992.

Then the startling news broke: with the loss of Hong Kong, the Brigade of Gurkhas was to be reduced by half. Dreams of promotion now seemed even more remote. With so many more men looking for a way to simply stay in the brigade, what hope was there? The first effects of the reduction would impact my battalion; 2/2 GR was to be halved and absorb half of 1/2 GR. The remaining men in each battalion would be obliged to take early retirement on very small pensions, or dispersed via attachments to other British regiments. As one of less than a dozen Thakuri and Chetri among six to seven hundred Gurung and Magar, one of them my superior, I did not expect to be offered any of the more favourable options when the time came – more likely I would be among the first laid off. Retiring Gurkhas already faced a frugal future, many leaving behind salaries of up to £800 a month for next to nothing back in Nepal. With many more now looking at possible redundancy, there was understandable anxiety in the air.

An incident in Hong Kong added to the sense of unease. The initial report was that somewhere along the border a Gurkha soldier had attacked and killed one of his superiors. As more information filtered out, it was rumoured that the motive stemmed from caste differences between the two men. The perpetrator, said to be academically bright had felt he was being blocked by the superior who had allegedly used the man's physical fitness shortcomings as a means to impose punishments and bully him over a period of time. This it was said had eventually driven him over the edge, with tragic results. Though an appeal procedure did now exist, the soldier had it seemed felt unable to make those in higher authority aware of his difficulties, and that no one could help him. The

man's colleagues in the platoon perhaps felt as powerless as he to do anything about the situation, and could have had little inkling of what it would lead to.

At his trial, the accused opted to conduct his own defence. Being an articulate man he was able to relate to the court events leading up to the incident and how he believed these had pushed him to the brink. Nevertheless he had unlawfully killed someone, and a long prison sentence was inevitable. This grim episode and the way the defendant had described his experiences prompted concerned debate within the British hierarchy about the issue of caste within the Brigade of Gurkhas. The problem was not that straightforward to assess or solve however, Gurkha culture being still to a large extent a closed community within the army.

When my four year tour in Hong Kong came to an end, I watched my numberees heading off to the UK and a large pay rise, while I was selected for Brunei, still with no prospect of further training or ERE. I thought again of my father, and my promise to him to look after the family and do well in my career. It was looking more and more like wishful thinking. But then something occurred that was to give me fresh hope. A new platoon commander was appointed – a British officer. For this man caste was irrelevant. He treated everyone on merit, and seemed willing to encourage his subordinates on an equal basis. Perhaps things would look up now.

I was fortunate to be sent on a two-week exercise to Brunei, along with stints in New Zealand and Malaysia. Brunei and the Gurkhas, including my own regiment 2nd Gurkha Rifles, had a strong bond, forged during a particular chapter of the country's history. Though geographically small compared to its neighbours, Brunei had become immensely rich from its oil and natural gas, with the Sultan at various times estimated

the world's richest man. Though most of the wealth remained in the hands of the ruling family, Brunei's dictatorship was considered a benevolent one. The early 1960s however saw the emergence of a group calling for greater equality. The Partai Raayat (People's Party) had an allied fighting force, the North Kalimantan National Army, estimated at 8,000 men believed to have had military training and grouping in the Brunei jungles, and across the borders in Sarawak and Sabah.

Seeing trouble brewing, after diplomatic pressure from Britain and Malaya the Sultan offered a limited form of elections, keeping seventeen of the thirty-three seats on offer for his own loyal representatives. The remaining sixteen were all won by the People's Party, and feeling they had been unfairly denied political power the National Army decided on direct action. Their plan was to capture the Sultan and force him to become their obedient figurehead in a new government of Borneo comprised of Brunei, Sabah and Sarawak. Police stations holding valuable caches of weapons were to be raided, and at the Shell oil fields in Seria dozens of senior European managers were to be taken hostage. On December 8th 1962 at two hours past midnight attacks were mounted on the Sultan's palace, Prime Minister's house, and the police and power stations. The speed of the uprising took the British forces by surprise, while the Queen's Own Highlanders, nominated for just this emergency, were away fighting pirates in the north.

The 1st Battalion the 2nd Gurkha Rifles (1/2 GR) stationed in Singapore were urgently summoned. With no RAF transport immediately available, some of the boys apparently flew in ahead courtesy of Malayan Airlines. They at least were on the spot before daylight faded again. The local police commissioner, a Mr Outram had so far managed to secure the airstrip and protect the Sultan. Hostages had however been

taken at the Seria oil fields. 1/2 GR got stuck in immediately, encountering prolonged resistance in Brunei town throughout the night. By the following day they were in control, and were reinforced by colleagues, some deployed to secure other strategic points across the region. The fight for Brunei town was not without loss for the Gurkhas – two dead, one of them a British officer, and six wounded. Battling the insurgents at Brunei's coastal town of Tutong cost the lives of twenty-six of the 1st and 2nd Gurkhas. Hard fighting continued for several weeks, the outcome by no means certain. When Brunei was finally secured towards the end of December 1962, sixty-five insurgents had been killed with seven hundred and eighty-three surrendered or taken prisoner. The 1/2 GR loss remained at two killed, seventeen wounded.

In the opinion of some military historians, the Gurkhas were instrumental in the success of this short, sharp campaign against the Brunei insurgency. The Sultan certainly seemed to feel so, and the Gurkhas were henceforth revered and trusted by the old man, and paid to look after him, standing guard at his bedside until the day he died. The special relationship with the country and its ruling family continued, and as well as the regular battalions stationed in Brunei, a large number of retired Gurkhas were employed by the family to maintain security in and around the Sultan's palace. A comprehensive account of the Gurkha operations in Brunei and elsewhere can be found in Christopher Bullock's excellent book 'Britain's Gurkhas'.

Brunei was also the location of the British Army's Jungle Warfare Wing, a specialist training school where British soldiers of various ranks plus some from New Zealand and Singapore, were taught the techniques of fighting and survival in jungle terrain. Reporting to the HQ here each morning in flip-flops and T-Shirts, some of the attendees complained at

not being saluted by the Gurkha sentries on the gate. When the sentries pleaded that because of the men's casual wear they could not tell their ranks and therefore didn't know who to salute, a standing order was issued to salute anyone with a white face.

Encouraged by the positive attitude of the new Platoon Commander I spoke to a gurujee I felt I could trust, asking him discreetly how I could get around the caste issue and get myself on some courses. He was sympathetic, and then went on to tell me a story. It was a true account, concerning an event that had taken place on a single day some twenty years previously, when the Gurkhas had been sent to assist in tackling the difficult and dangerous situation escalating with the insurgents in Malaya. One of those deployed, the Gurujee told me, was a young man from our own battalion. As Gunner No. 2, while out on patrol by a riverbank this Gurkha had been involved in a prolonged and vicious exchange of fire, during which he personally had killed no less that eleven of the enemy. On investigation, the bullets lodged in the tree he was positioned behind testified to the ferocity of the gun battle. Colleagues and superiors congratulated him on his bravery and assured him he would be decorated for his actions.

Five months later there was a medal ceremony. Out of the patrol on that day Gunner No. 1 received the Military Medal, one officer from the Artillery the DSO, and the platoon commander Gurung was awarded the Military Cross. Gunner No. 2 was not even mentioned. His own courageous and vital role in the encounter had simply not been reported by the platoon commander in his written report, and had therefore never reached the attention of the British, who were the ones handing out the medals. The poor man had gone on to spend the next few years in a low state of morale, though apparently

still devoted to duty in the line of fire, subsequently saving an endangered colleague. Compounding the ignominy suffered in Malaya however, he was sent packing four years before his expected retirement date, in the mass Gurkha redundancies of the time. And this was all, apparently, because of caste.

It was sad to think that a man's courageous devotion to duty under fire should be disregarded while others were publicly honoured. And here was I simply trying to access some training courses. Perhaps I should give up trying to excel, and instead accept the situation, mark time, collect my pay and try to be content. My gurujee seemed to think so. Concluding his story he said that such things had always gone on in the Gurkhas, and if they happened in wartime it was unlikely to be any different now. Do your fifteen years he counselled me, and be thankful for what you get.

Was this what Lance Corporal Rajkumar Rai had also been told? With a natural talent for the lightning fast martial art of Tae Kwon Do, Rajkumar had already won a gold medal in the SAARC tournament, and was keen to aim even higher. Nurturing and promoting his exceptional abilities would be good for the battalion, the Gurkhas and Nepal. Rajkumar worked tirelessly at improving his speed and skill, and put in a request to the battalion to compete in the forthcoming Olympics in South Korea. When the request was denied he offered to pay the necessary expenses from his own pay, but was still not allowed to attend. Rajkumar was from East Nepal – his battalion comprised Western Gurkhas. Regional or caste issues most likely played some part in holding him back. Whatever the reason it was a lost opportunity. A Gurkha bronze, silver or gold Olympic medal would have been fantastic for everyone involved. Rajkumar's prowess had made him something of a

star in the battalion. For such a hard working and respected individual to be needlessly thwarted suggested one thing to the younger boys: that there was little point trying to shine.

The impending reduction of the Gurkhas was increasingly on everyone's mind. I fully expected to be among those moved out of 2/2 GR, and sent to another unit, where the prospects for advancement would be even slimmer, since those units would inevitably look after their own. Retirement was an option to avoid if at all possible. I had little money saved, and the small pension nowhere enough to support the family. Attachment to another unit seemed best, but would surely end any hope of promotion. However as further details of the options emerged, in the back of my mind an idea began to take shape.

Meanwhile it was announced the next Operation Raleigh was to take place in Malaysia, and that a team of six Gurkhas would be required to work alongside and support the volunteers. With the encouragement of my new British Platoon Commander I put in a request to join them, and was thrilled to be accepted. Operation Raleigh was an annual event organised for young people in Britain and other European countries, working on adventurous, environmental projects around the world. The aim was to achieve specific goals for the community, and in the process offer personal development and skills to those taking part. Though looking forward to this new experience, on learning more about what the scheme involved I also grew nervous. Firstly I had no experience of leadership, and though able to write a little English, verbal communication would be a struggle. Could I really see myself instructing and inspiring, in reasonably fluent English, a team of young, Western civilians in difficult and unfamiliar terrain?

First came some jungle familiarisation for me in Brunei, thence on to Kota-Kinabalu, the provincial capital of Sabah, Malaysia, to join the other Raleigh team leaders. Our first job was to stage a week of acclimatisation and introductory training for the young Venturers, of whom there were around two hundred in all, mostly from the UK plus some Malaysians, Japanese, Poles, Romanians and one from the Falkland Islands. The training was conducted across a series of stands at which the team leaders would demonstrate the various skills soon to be required, the Venturers spending time with each to master the basics then move on to the next. My role was to teach outdoors survival – pitching camp, stringing hammocks, water purification, and clearing a route through the jungle. Even apparently simple tasks, such as putting up a tent or shelter had to be explained step by step, as previous Venturers had sustained eye injuries stretching the elastic bungee ropes. Likewise the safe and efficient use of a parang, a machete-like implement for cutting dense undergrowth, was covered in careful detail.

The subject commanding most attention, and some horrified looks from those unacquainted with the tropical outdoors, was insect awareness. Though the Venturers had all received anti-malaria treatment, mosquito bites were still unpleasant and the use of repellent sprays was closely observed, likewise how to deal with leeches. Advice on zipping up tents at night was readily accepted, but when told they must also keep all footwear either inside the tent or tied up tightly in a plastic bag, some of the young people asked why. The instructor explained the nocturnal habits of spiders and scorpions, including their penchant for curling up in small, enclosed spaces, boots and shoes among the favourite hidey-holes of these deadly creatures. Then there were the snakes. I knew of a Gurkha serving in the tropics, who when putting his boot on one morning felt an

obstruction inside. Realising it was a snake his first impulse was to withdraw his foot, but knew this would allow the snake to uncoil and strike. He therefore rammed his foot hard down in the boot, using all his weight to crush and kill the reptile.

At the end of the training week the Venturers were split into fifteen teams, each assigned a leader. The series of three-week projects they would be tackling were in separate sectors located over a wide geographical area, and included construction, trail-finding and marine biology research. My team's first project, in Sabah, was to create and mark an overland trail in the jungle for future visitors to the area – ecologists, tourists and naturalists. Prior to setting out the army medic accompanying us gave a talk on the climactic conditions we would be facing, including sudden very heavy rain showers, and how to keep healthy in the jungle.

My anxieties about the interpersonal aspects of the job had not been entirely unfounded. Whilst practical skills could be conveyed through demonstration, which helped fill the gaps in my English, I still felt quite awkward in the group, who were naturally all looking to me to take control. The shyness was partly innate Nepalese reserve, and having never been around Europeans, other than British officers at such close quarters, I was surprised, sometimes embarrassed by their behaviour. The team comprised young men and women, and being together constantly I learned how different some of their norms and attitudes were to my own. In Nepal males and females had separate, defined roles. Intimate physical contact between the sexes was simply not seen in public. Here though, at the end of a hard day hacking our way through the jungle, as we sat round the campfire I was shocked to see the boys and girls relaxing their aching limbs by massaging one another.

Three weeks later our role, creating the first phase of the trail was complete. There would now be one week's rest before the teams went on to their next project. While in Sabah for this interlude, as part of the expedition I led the team on an expedition up Mount Kota-Kinabalu, at 13,435 ft above sea level the highest peak in South-East Asia. The climb was to take a couple of days, staying overnight in a hotel about halfway up. Some of the team were fitter than others, but I was on hand to help those needing it and ensure everyone took part and enjoyed the experience.

The finest views from the top of the mountain were said to be in the early morning, after which the mists set in, blanking out the landscape. On the second day therefore we started at first light, made steady progress and reached the summit as the sun rose. It had been worth it. Below us was the Malaysian jungle, the vivid green canopy stretching in every direction as far as the eye could see, broken here and there by the signs of human habitation, small clusters of buildings nestled in among the trees. At 13,000 ft altitude sickness was a possibility but everyone seemed ok. We sat down on the summit, the fitter and the still out-of-breath alike marvelling at the view and glad they had made the effort for the spectacular panorama that Mount Kota Kinabalu had given us.

That night there was another memorable experience, though this time it was me that was the novice. Completing the full descent of Kota-Kinabalu in one day, we checked into another hotel at the base of the mountain. Over dinner the Venturers were in high spirits and looking to celebrate. They were also insistent I join in and accompany them to the bar. Soon the laughter, and the drinks were flowing freely. 'Come on, have another, you deserve it!' cheered the smiling Venturers. It certainly felt good to relax and quench the thirst with a beer or

two. After three I was even more relaxed. Then came a fourth – or was that a fifth…? The circle of grinning faces was moving around me, as was the room. The laughter grew louder and I was laughing too. Next morning I couldn't remember much. Though not my first taste of alcohol it was the first time I had been drunk, and now I could chalk up another achievement, my first hangover: so this was what it felt like. Along with the headache and dry mouth was a strange sense of shame. I was unusually quiet all day, prompting several of the Venturers to ask if I was all right. Perhaps I wasn't the only one feeling guilty.

After a rally in Sabah for all the Operation Raleigh participants it was a new team and another project for me: building a suspension bridge across a river for the inhabitants of a small village. Our specific task was to assist the ex-army civil engineers erecting the large upright poles on each bank, mixing the concrete supplied by the Malay government, and sourcing stones from the surrounding area. Crossing the river in the traditional hollowed out tree boats owned by the local small farmers and men who hunted with blowpipes, we soon became acquainted with them. There was always a warm welcome. We spent much of our free time playing football with the families and enjoying their hospitality, as well as generous amounts of their home made wine. This brew, called Tapai, was raw and strong, and sent some of the young Venturers quite wild in the evenings. Laughing and yelling at around midnight, they would suddenly leap up and decide to go swimming in the river. The Tapai certainly created a convivial atmosphere and helped everyone unwind.

I too was growing more at ease and making friends among the Venturers. In the process my English was improving. They talked about British and Hollywood films, expressing disbelief

when I said I had seen a number of them in Hong Kong. True I had understood little of the dialogue then, but after our discussions the plots made more sense. We were each, East and West learning and recalibrating our ideas about the other, another benefit of the Raleigh experience.

My third project assignment began with a flight from Sabah to Sarawak. Joining another new team of Venturers, we were met by local government officials and provided with a small boat to take us along the coast of the South China Sea, alighting on beautiful red sand beaches. From here we were to enter and establish sympathetic new trails in the Similajau National Park, an area rich in rare flora and fauna, of great interest to naturalists and conservationists worldwide. We would also be on 'turtle watch' for a while, looking out for unscrupulous egg hunters preying on the turtles' nests. Moving inland through the jungle, we stumbled across a remarkable sight: slewed on its side amid the trees a huge old steam train, whatever track it once ran on buried long ago in the dense undergrowth, a fascinating relic perhaps of the last days of the British Empire.

Rounding off the National Park project with a team visit to Sarawak's large Ninah Cave, it was time for me to return to Brunei. The three months had proved a very positive experience. The Venturers were responsive, enthusiastic and fun to work with, and my English language skills and confidence had grown. I felt assured now of the ability to operate alongside UK colleagues, and the possibilities for the future began to seem more real. With fingers crossed, consistent effort and a supportive CO, things might yet happen.

So it was I left Malaysia and my new friends, with newfound optimism. Something else was putting a spring in my step. Before going our separate ways there were fond farewells among the Venturers, promises to meet up for a reunion, and

exchanging of contact details. One particular person I was very keen to see again. She was a young English girl, I was a serving Nepalese Gurkha; we were two people worlds apart, yet having found much in common too a friendship had formed. The chemistry between us though was more than this, and saying goodbye in Malaysia we both knew it. Operation Raleigh had expanded my horizons in more ways than one.

6. Objective SAS

Back in Brunei the impending Hong Kong handover and reduction in Gurkha numbers was the hot topic. Given the option of retirement or transfer most were hoping for the latter. Among the units it was suggested we apply to, was the Special Air Service. Set up by David Stirling, a laird and former Scots Guardsman during the Second World War, the SAS was thought to have been so named to deceive the enemy into thinking Britain had a much larger air force than was actually the case. In reality it was a small guerrilla unit of highly motivated, parachute trained men, tasked to sabotage and disrupt German forces behind enemy lines. Across the vast deserts of North Africa this close knit body of men succeeded in destroying two hundred and fifty aircraft on the ground, together with several hundred vehicles, ammunition stores and vital road and rail arteries. Stirling himself was captured several times by the Germans but repeatedly escaped, until finally incarcerated in Colditz in 1942.

After the war the SAS was initially mothballed, but subsequent events, notably the Malay Emergency, proved this elite British force had a vital ongoing role in an increasingly unpredictable world. The public profile of the SAS remained relatively low, probably an intentional policy during the unit's sensitive and dangerous operations. This changed overnight however when in 1980 a group of armed Arab separatists took over the Iranian Embassy building in South Kensington, London, holding a number of innocent civilians hostage.

After several days of patient negotiations conducted by the police and British government, the dead body of one of the hostages was thrown out on the street. The decision was taken to mobilise the SAS, a detailed plan drawn up to rescue those held inside, and diversions employed to distract the terrorists. The dramatic storming of the Embassy was watched on TV screens around the world, and the survival of all but one of the remaining hostages seen as a landmark victory over the forces of terrorism. The image and reputation of the SAS rocketed to mythic status.

Whenever my senior colleagues mentioned the SAS, it was in terms of awe and admiration, the operatives viewed in a class of their own, capable of engaging the enemy in a unique way outside normal war-fighting procedures. The standard for entry was extremely high, the training probably the toughest in the world. But there was something more than this. It was an almost mystical attitude, a deeply held belief that the men of the SAS were themselves innately special, even invincible - each and every one as hard to kill as James Bond. Gurkhas who had played as hunter forces in escape and evasion exercises for them, spoke of the near impossibility of the task: 'You'd see the guy, go to grab him and he was gone, vanished into thin air... then he'd appear a minute later half a kilometre away.' This was the typical observation of those who had experienced the ghost-like stealth of the SAS. Some said the regiment's initials really stood for Speed, Aggression and Surprise.

To join this legendary institution seemed such a remote possibility that few of my colleagues had shown any interest, largely it seemed to me through fear of rejection. On the face of it this didn't seem unreasonable, as no Gurkha had ever served in the SAS. Then I recalled the words of my superior in training: you are all soldiers, you all eat in the cookhouse alike,

there's no reason why any one of you should not do as well as another. We were all only human, true. The question was, were the SAS superhuman?

The idea I had been turning over in my mind since before Operation Raleigh was to give the SAS a go. I too felt the fear of rejection. The prevailing culture in the Gurkhas was to stick to your known strengths, not attempt to strive beyond them, for if you failed in the attempt there was no pat on the back for trying, rather a tendency to shame at having overreached yourself. My military skills and fitness were probably well above average, but there were lots of other very fit, very switched on guys out there, all hungry to prove they had what it took to be 'Special Forces', and the failure rate was high. My mastery of the English language, although much improved since Raleigh, was still not that of a native speaker, and this could be one factor to let me down. However since I was unhappy in my existing unit and likely to be forced out before long anyway, what did I have to lose?

On hearing my request, my superiors, judging my English and other skills insufficient at present, recommended I apply first to the Pathfinders, my platoon commander informing me I was eligible for their pre-selection. The key role of the Pathfinders was as an advance force for the Paras, inserting early into the battlefield to recce, secure and mark the drop zone for the oncoming main brigade. PF methods of operation were in many ways similar to the SAS, but at brigade level. Prospective recruits had to be extremely fit, highly motivated, quick learners, adaptable and capable of working in small teams, or when necessary alone. Permission to apply was granted with a note of caution; the likelihood of my getting through was regarded as very slim, and since failure was never a comfortable outcome in the battalion's ethos my commander

was clearly concerned to prepare me for it. My response was to accept the application as a gamble, and I gave him the confident assurance I would 'make it'. There was of course, absolutely no certainty I would be able to deliver on that.

In October, in the middle of the Dashain festival I flew to Hong Kong, TDBG and reported to the Pathfinder NCO running the pre-selection programme. For the eight candidates, all Gurkhas, a full and intensive week lay ahead, including long endurance, marching with weights and multiple skills assessments. For the Pathfinders a key requirement was navigational aptitude. We were issued with rations, water, a Bergen weighted to 50 lbs equating to ammunition, weapons, a map and compass and dropped off in the middle of a large area of scrubland.

We had twenty-four hours to find our way via a series of checkpoints to a final rendezvous point. At each checkpoint an instructor would order a different military test – stripping down a weapon, NBC practical knowledge, first aid practical, war fighting knowledge etc, we never knew what to expect – to see how switched on we could remain under tiredness and duress. The test completed the instructor would then give out the next grid reference. The bushy terrain, nondescript even in daylight, became even more impenetrable as night fell, and some people were lost before the first checkpoint, and only half reaching the second. Ploughing on through the darkness was difficult but the energy stayed with me. As dawn approached the effect of sleep deprivation began to kick in, and between the fifth and sixth checkpoints I had the increasing feeling I had had enough. By the eighth my body was seriously telling me to give up.

During the twenty-four hours of this arduous exercise I had negotiated almost every corner of the training area, as well as climbing twice up and down Tai Mo Shan Hill, the

highest peak in Hong Kong's Northern Territories. Through a combination of luck and sheer determination, I was among the few who got all the way round. Then it was swiftly back to camp for a written military knowledge test, and the following day an assault course, and more quizzing. The final day of the pre-selection week included a five-mile forced march, during which, in view of the Gurkhas' reputed inability to march without breaking into a trot, running was strictly forbidden. By some fluke I seemed to be the only one who could emulate the PF instructor's pace throughout the five miles. Out of the eight, myself and one other candidate were selected to attend the Pathfinder selection cadre in Aldershot the following February.

For now I expected to stay attached to TDBG Hong Kong, but having cleared the hurdles so far to joining the Pathfinders and about to enter the final stage, my British superiors were anxious I should not fail. To this end they were keen to improve my English and keep me in peak physical shape with extra courses. With nothing available at that time in Hong Kong, I was dispatched in December to the UK. Church Crookham was as cold and foggy as my first visit, and not being in the mood to hang around I went to see the Pathfinder commanders. They however did not want to see me until February's selection, but suggested I prepare by taking the pre-Para selection in January. There was no time to include any parachute jumps before Pathfinder selection, but the pre-Para would provide a useful dummy run in other skills.

Towards the end of December I obtained an out pass. The girl I had met on Operation Raleigh came to meet me in Church Crookham. As her car pulled up outside the barracks, I felt all eyes on me as I got in. The rules on Gurkhas and non-Nepalese girls only precluded marriage, but fraternising with Westerners still caused a few raised eyebrows and gossip in

the battalion. We drove over to Guildford in Surrey where she took me to a pub just outside the town, near Shalford, not far from the River Wey. It was a beautiful spot, set alongside green meadows. Remembering the drunken night in Malaysia, and the subsequent hangover, I decided to steer clear of alcohol on this occasion, but was pleased to go in the bar, sit among people and sip a coke. It was a pleasant, convivial atmosphere, but after a few minutes I felt very uncomfortable. This was the days before smoke free pubs, and a thick fog was filling the room, as well as my throat, lungs and eyes. I told my girlfriend I was sorry but simply couldn't remain there, and we adjourned outside for some welcome fresh air. After an overnight stay in Guildford my breathing recovered, and we drove up to her home in Newcastle. Her friends and relations were most hospitable, and my first experience of an English family Christmas with glittering decorations, carols and turkey, a very pleasant one indeed.

In the New Year it was back to Aldershot for the pre-Para selection – the P Coy course; two weeks of 'tabbing' - marching with a rolled doss bag weighted with books or sandbag equating to ammunition and rations – steeple chases and races carrying logs. There were tests of agility and confidence, climbing high walls and walking along the top, and using aerial runways, or zip wires. January had turned out bitterly cold, and one day making my way across some icy metals bars on the steeplechase I slipped and fell. My leg though not broken became very swollen. The accident meant dropping the P Coy course, and needing a crutch to walk. My biggest worry was ruining my chances for the Pathfinder selection.

I went to see the Pathfinder Platoon Commander and Sergeant, both extremely experienced individuals. The commander immediately caught my attention as a very

impressive character, tall and wiry, extremely fit looking, with a white, bushy moustache and grey hair. I sensed here was an exceptional individual, of great experience and knowledge, shrewd, tough-minded yet caring when need be, and ruthless in conflict – someone to inspire absolute confidence and trust, a natural leader of men. Both he and the Sergeant assured me I was there not for the P Coy course, but for the Pathfinders.

By February the leg seemed on the mend, though I remained concerned there might be a relapse. On the due day I reported to Pathfinder HQ with the rest of the candidates, around forty in all, mainly privates from the Parachute regiments with a few NCOs and other officers, plus two other Gurkhas, both from UK battalions. This was the start of Pathfinder selection proper, and it was to involve four phases. Phase one was a week in Aldershot testing physical fitness. The tabs were taken round Fleet, Church Crookham and Aldershot by a Pathfinder NCO working us at a relentlessly fast pace, any stragglers being dropped from the course on the spot. The tabbing seemed to go on forever, in fact it was a few days, an eight miler to begin with, then two, five and finishing with a ten. At least it was overland not on concrete, which kills the feet. Between the tabs was free running, with plenty of encouragement: 'Come on, loosen your legs!'

Once a candidate's physical stamina, strength and speed were proven, the next criterion for a Pathfinder was a high degree of competence in overland navigation. At this stage these skills were learned indoors - map and compass work and pacing out distances accurately. Basic first aid, survival techniques and avoiding adverse effects of wind chill and other extreme weather conditions were also taught. The demands were prolonged and intense. Throughout I was conscious of my damaged leg, fearful that any moment it might let me down. By

the end of the week nearly a third of the candidates had been failed on the PT, while, despite the odd twinge in my leg I was among those still standing, as were the other two Gurkhas.

It was time for Phase Two. Our numbers now down to about twenty-five, we left Aldershot heading west, out of England and into Wales to embark on practical navigation and endurance, applying what we had learned in the comfort of a gymnasium, in the bleak, unwelcoming landscape of the Brecon Beacons. First came ten days of running in the hills, navigating point to point over the snow-covered terrain. It was February, and needless to say I felt the cold, much more than my British colleagues. While they tabbed round out of doors with only vests under their combat dress, I opted for a heavy wool jersey. Seeing this the NCOs and cadre staff became convinced I would fall out with heat exhaustion, but for me the extra padding was a necessity.

For the big navigational exercise we were dropped with rations, map, compass and weighted packs, in an isolated spot, our objective a series of checkpoints leading to a final RV. Just how big a challenge this exercise would be I was about to find out. Coming from Nepal, experiencing since only the warm climes of Hong Kong and Brunei, I found the environment I was plunged into here in Brecon absolutely gruesome. Recent weeks had seen heavy snow in the area, and now the beginning of March, it was still falling. The Black Mountains were in total whiteout, the surrounding landscape blank, and with the added presence of thick fog, ridges and valleys vanished.

Everything depended on the compass, finding due north, working out where you were and how to reach your given objective. Running long distances in daylight was a world away from this dark, wet no man's land, where without warning you found yourself climbing steeply uphill needing all fours on

the broken, uneven ground while balancing your weapon in front, the heavily weighted Bergen always on your back. We were strictly observed too. Any man slipping weight out of his Bergen was given a boulder instead. Periodically you would stumble into an unseen bog or swamp, then realise you had been going completely the wrong way and have to double back, sodden and bruised over the same horrendous route to start all over again. Checkpoints were located not on hills or salient features but in the middle of nowhere, with no identifiable features around. Fog was a menace, obscuring what little sense of a place could be perceived.

Nine long, grinding days of this culminated in a sixty-five km navigational exercise, again carrying total weight including weapons of 70 lbs, and navigating every high point in the Brecons to complete within twenty hours. Staying mentally focused while often on the point of collapse required willpower, not least trying to remember the precise advice of your instructors for such conditions. Finally, nearing what I believed to be the penultimate checkpoint, I saw one of my colleagues, a candidate who, having some previous experience in the area knew the route. As we drew level he told me this was in fact the last checkpoint. Greatly relieved I halted, waiting for the instructor to direct me to the transport back to base. Instead he gave me grid references to another position sixteen kilometres further on. Assuming this was a joke I stood there, looking expectantly into the distance for a truck. When he asked why I wasn't moving, I realised it was the other guy, now gone on his way who had played the joke.

My spirits plummeted. I wanted to go no further. Hong Kong had been tough, but this was tougher. Having stopped I could feel every muscle in my body aching and sore, while hunger and fatigue was making me nauseous and dizzy; if only for a

warm shower, a bed and sleep. I could enjoy all three, if right now I said three simple words: I give up. Instead I set off again into the snow. As it turned out, my colleague with the sense of humour about the final checkpoint was dropped from the selection. The other two Gurkhas and myself were still in.

Phase Three covered live firing, including ambush and attack, offensive defence and dealing with enemy contact during insertion. We also learned procedures for extracting wounded colleagues, and - the more headline grabbing aspect of special operations – how to carry out raids on high-level targets to capture or kill. Then followed training in a particularly vital, yet of necessity invisible aspect of warfare: covert insertion to carry out surveillance work. These insertions required stealthy, circuitous movement, patience and long endurance in cramped, inhospitable conditions. If the enemy was imagined as a wheel comprising numerous dangerous spokes, the aim of covert surveillance, rather than 'piddle around on the rim' as some put it, was to pinpoint the cog and enable front line troops to destroy the entire wheel in one swift action with minimum collateral damage. The crucial objective was to 'see without being seen', and insertion into an OP (Observation Post) was ideally made by night.

Our particular brief was to conduct surveillance on a series of given enemy positions, finding suitable OPs from aerial photos or map references. We had to get hidden fast, digging in or using the natural features of the terrain to disappear. Once in the OP it was a case of staying put in sub-zero temperatures, maintaining observation of the enemy position and radioing information to HQ until it was time to strike. This could be a matter of hours, days or weeks, depending on the particular situation. Since smoke and cooking sounds could betray our position we atè only cold food. Watch was maintained back

and front as well as on the enemy HQ. Even off the watch rota sleep was difficult. Being static for hours on end in the cold and wet caused bleeding and swelling of the extremities, and 'trench foot' in some.

Phase Four, like the closing heat of any contest, had lifted the adrenalin level among the remaining candidates to a new high. Not that anyone wanted to display the fact. All our energies were required for what lay ahead: E and E (Escape and Evasion) and R2I (Resistance to Interrogation). The ability to insert covertly and observe the enemy was all very well, but what if something went wrong and your position was compromised? If enemy forces discovered your OP and were about to kill or capture you what should you do? Evasion might mean ditching all equipment including your radio, if possible destroying it first. Once away from the enemy, how would you then survive without rations, and make your way back to your unit, possibly many miles away? Knowing how to live off the land was essential, and how to obtain water in desert terrain from morning dew, plants, condensation. Being able to snare, kill and cook edible creatures, including snakes and lizards, could save your life. Meanwhile you might still be in enemy territory, pursued. The E and E sessions were prolonged and gruelling, chased relentlessly by enemy hunter forces for hours, every candidate intent on becoming a swift, silent ghost, while gasping to survive.

By the close of Phase Four approximately twenty percent of the original candidates were selected. I was still in, just. And I was now a Pathfinder, almost. Two further challenges awaited, before I could earn the coveted wings I had dreamed of since first joining up. First was a 'confidence' course, run by the Paras and focused on moving at height, walking, running,

and jumping from a 'Trinasium' tower. Unforgettable was the 'milling', notorious Para-style boxing, rapid fire at close quarters for two full minutes.

Once deemed fit and able enough on the ground, there came capability in the sky. With the brief initial experience gained in Hong Kong the basics of jumps training wasn't too difficult. There was though a context in which heights did scare me: practising from a balloon. The experience of floating almost motionless in a creaking basket, surrounded by wide-open sky and a 600 ft drop below, with only the flapping breeze to break the silence and knowing you were about to leap out was a strangely unnerving one. Waiting my turn in the balloon, at the crucial moment the guy in front of me simply couldn't bring himself to jump, and as a result was ordered immediately RTU (Returned To Unit). There were no second chances.

The balloon stage completed we moved on to plane jumps, performed attached to a line, which, having exited the roaring hatch of the Hercules and dropped the appropriate distance, would automatically trip open your 'chute. Eight jumps were required in clean fatigue (without equipment), thereafter with kit and equipment. One of these was to be over a training area in daylight, and one or more at night. Having successfully undertaken these jumps, and with the requirements for the P Course fulfilled, in June of 1992 I was awarded my Parachute Wings. As I had anticipated this gave me a terrific kick, a great sense of pride. It all seemed incredible: I was qualified to jump from 800 ft day and night with operational equipment, anywhere in the world.

There was little time to rest on laurels. A step forward was only a prelude to the one beyond, in this case HALO. An acronym for High Altitude, Low Opening HALO was freefall jumping from between 12,000 and 24,000 feet, using oxygen,

and, for us, carrying full operational equipment. First stop was Brize Norton Air Base, for one week of familiarisation with kit, equipment and procedures, plus medical checks for high altitude. The kind of conditions and sensations we could expect were simulated in a ground container. There were a few initial jumps in clean fatigue from a triangulation tower before we were gradually loaded up with kit and equipment. These preliminaries completed, we boarded a flight down to the military base at Pau in France, to begin HALO jumping for real.

On site at Pau were multiple teams of instructors, including packers for the parachutes – one military parachute and a reserve for each man. My first HALO was to be from a relatively low 12,000 feet, the limit without oxygen, and not the eventual operational height of 18,000 ft plus. This time there was no line, and I would be going solo, with no hand holding as in civilian freefall, but following the instructor headfirst out. As the Hercules climbed higher I began to experience slight butterflies in the stomach, a feeling that intensified as the pilot called 'five minutes', then 'two'. I stood up. The engine had been slowed to around 120 knots in order that we jump as close together as possible. At this crawling speed the pilot had a job to maintain an even keel, and every so often the plane would drop suddenly, leaving my stomach in mid air as I struggled to stay upright.

The instant the hatch in the belly of the aircraft opened the cold air began to billow in, and I could see the clear blue sky, with the snow capped Pyrenees in the distance. The rigour of the training had not prepared me for the reality of the moment. The butterflies were overtaken in a sudden rush of nerves - not quite panic but an intense, 'what's going to happen?' kind of feeling, even the lightning thought 'suppose something goes

wrong?' The red light overhead went off, the green came on. My instructor had gone. I raised my arms, elbows at right angles and palms face down, and dropped into the slipstream.

I had been taught that parachuting was not just a matter of falling out of a plane and hoping for the best. Quite the contrary - wind speed and direction had to be calculated in order to jump at the optimum time and position to reach the target drop zone. Once airborne, the parachutist had to become like a bird in flight, both before his 'chute opened, by specific use of his body shape and limbs, and afterwards, by steering the chute to land as close as possible to the zone. Below I could see my instructor seemingly floating up to meet me, his arms outstretched. In fact he was deliberately slowing his descent, waiting for me to draw level with him. As we met his hands reached out, eye contact was made, a reassuring grin, as if to say 'All right?' offered, for me to return. The fear was now turning rapidly to exhilaration. The first skill to master in the air was the art of simply keeping still, which the instructor was now demonstrating. Once my arms and legs were spread, face down, staying level was not difficult. To steer left or right you moved a hand or leg. Again my instructor showed how, but this required care: overdo it and you flipped over. Every few seconds or so I was given a reminding nod to check the altimeter on my wrist; when it read 4,500 feet I must open my parachute – which meant I had first to fall 7,500. If my nerves overcame me or I fainted - or on deployment was wounded – an automatic 'height finder' device was designed to kick in and open the 'chute for me.

Spread far below were the fields and terraced farmsteads of the French countryside, the green patchwork dotted with small villages. I checked the altimeter: 4,500. I pulled the cord and a few seconds later felt a jolt, which was much gentler than on

the static line. Looking up I saw the large blue canopy unfurl. Everything seemed to have gone into slow motion, like a car leaving the motorway. The outlines of the hedges and farm buildings grew steadily more defined, likewise the edges of the airfield towards which I was steering. When the ground rose swiftly up, the impact was soft, the large billowing 'chute almost placing me down. Standing on the runway was the Hercules, waiting to take me aloft and repeat the performance.

I completed four jumps that day. The second time, awaiting the green light in the cabin the anxiety returned, but after the third I began to feel more at ease, and was enjoying the 'high' feeling – an inextricable mixture of apprehension and joy that came at the moment of dropping into the sky. Gradually altitude was increased, and I was jumping with oxygen from up to 18,000 feet. To be operationally qualified to jump at this height required a total of more than sixty jumps under certain minimum criteria i.e. with full equipment and oxygen. The ultimate aim was to jump at night, with full operational equipment, avoiding detection by enemy radar. Weather conditions had to be near perfect however, and in Pau that autumn they were not in our favour. And with the French air controllers, even when the weather seemed fine, allowing us minimal opportunities to fly, after four weeks in Pau I had clocked up only forty-five jumps.

Back in the UK, hoping to complete my quota under the specified minimum conditions of kit and equipment, the weather again let us down. My progress was now stalled until I could get the remaining jumps under my belt. Meantime, ground training continued, including some large-scale exercises, the biggest and most impressive a joint exercise over Salisbury Plain, involving UK, US and European forces. As Pathfinders we inserted in advance, HALO-qualified personnel dropping covertly at first light in various locations, while our US colleagues arrived

similarly at their separate zones. After several days of recces, marking and securing, the main force appeared above us early one morning, a fleet of fifteen Hercules aircraft, rapidly filling the sky. First to drop were the vehicles and heavy equipment, the netted trucks landing mostly squarely, bar the odd one that rolled on impact. Then came the paratroops, a massive invasion force, the hundreds of green canopies descending in the red light of dawn an awe-inspiring sight.

Other international events included a large jump in France as part of the Liberation Day celebrations, and a joint exercise in Poland. The Poles were at this time in the process of shrugging off the influence of Russia, and keen to develop their ties with Western Europe. This gave us the opportunity to visit their country, including an excursion to Auschwitz, the former Nazi concentration camp. Having seen the recent film Schindler's List, to stand beside the entrance to the camp, with the sign above proclaiming 'Arbeit Macht Frei' (Work Sets You Free) was a chilling reminder that the Holocaust was a real historical event, and here thousands of people had been herded through the tall iron gates to suffer and die. As a soldier, the notion of what the job was all about suddenly became clearer. Crimes against humanity had not ended with the Holocaust; innocent people around the world were still oppressed. When peaceful means failed to curb the tyrants, then, in a just war soldiers must answer the call of duty. On first joining the Gurkhas I had looked forward to earning money, having a good job and seeing the world. Seeing Auschwitz showed me another dimension: that soldiering had a very serious purpose.

Parachuting, even in peacetime training was not entirely predictable, and not without risk. During a large exercise in Sardinia with Pathfinder and Parachute Regiment units, the clay of the landing zone, which under other weather conditions

might have been soft, was rock hard the day we dropped. Coming down I hit the ground with a jolt, and felt the impact sustained on my lower back and across the shoulders for some time, in fact to this day. I was one of the lucky ones; over fifty personnel sustained injuries, including several broken legs. The compensation claims from this incident were to take a long while for the MOD to deal with.

There were dangers too when operating at night. We did not realise just how perilous it could be, until an exercise after dark over Salisbury Plain. I was in the first group to jump, the descent was smooth and I landed without incident, as did the rest of my colleagues. Or so we thought. For on regrouping at the RV point it was discovered that one man, the other Gurkha on the Pathfinder course, and one of my original numberees, was missing. A search was ordered, the assumption being he had drifted away from the designated drop zone and landed elsewhere. For almost an hour we scoured the fields and hedges with flash lamps but could find no sign of him.

A little later it transpired one of the local villagers had reported an incident. Our colleague had indeed drifted off course but with serious consequences, as it had taken him over a field containing pylons. Descending in darkness he had not noticed the live cables. In fact he cleared them by several feet, but passing by, a metal strap on his equipment caused the charge to leap from the cable and electrocute him. Some villagers had heard his cries for help and found him lying in the field. Initially unconscious he had then come to, the villagers had summoned help and he was taken straight to hospital. There had apparently been a momentary power cut in the village, coinciding with the contact. Some of our team had seen a flash as they dropped, but not realised what it was. A few days later I visited him. There were entry and exit wounds where

the voltage had passed through his body, and he was on an intravenous drip. After a period of recuperation and some skin grafts he went on to make a full recovery. A few feet nearer the cable that night and it would have been a very different story.

Pathfinders trained in climbing, mobility and air skills, and whilst required to be competent in all three, you were also expected to specialise in one. Mobility was a sticking point for me, since I had not for some reason been able to get on an army driving course. Meanwhile I hoped to make my special expertise climbing, and with the year drawing to a close and Christmas leave due, I decided to get in some practice on Britain's highest peak, Ben Nevis. I didn't envisage rock climbing as such, but some familiarisation with mountain terrain. Armed with new Scarpa boots, a civilian rucksack and warm kit, I bought a rail ticket and changed trains at Glasgow, travelling through beautiful scenery to reach Fort William the day before Christmas Eve. Checking into the youth hostel close to the mountains, I had an evening meal and an early night, and, while other hostellers were sleeping off their festive hangovers, set out before first light towards Ben Nevis. As dawn broke, there was thick fog, which remained until mid-morning. At around the halfway point I came to a small lake and rested to look around, although visibility was still poor. Following the stone cairns I continued my ascent, surprised that no one else was around, not fully realising the significance of Christmas Eve. The sun came out, and it was fairly easy going, like fell walking on snow.

Reaching the summit at around 1,343 metres I laid down my rucksack and took a few photographs. The views were spectacular, across several miles of the Mumbles, and to the hills of Skye. On the other side of the valley I could see people now, skiers enjoying the slopes. In the mountains though,

things could be less benign than they appeared, even when the sun was shining, and snow in particular could be deceptive. But keen to make the most of the experience and take in every aspect of the beautiful panorama that lay around me, I ventured to the edges of the slopes with the camera. Leaning back to take a shot, I felt my foot slip. The ground had given way beneath me. As a large chunk of snow slid away below I struggled to regain my balance. Where the snow had drifted a cornice had formed, overlapping the solid rock and creating a brittle, precarious ledge. The drop below was steep, and I realised I would have to be careful.

To vary the walk back down, I decided to go via the long curving ridge from Ben Nevis to Carn Mor then Aonach Mor. It was here things got trickier. As I set out along the ridge, I quickly began to appreciate the effects of snow and ice on a steep slope, and, more importantly that I wasn't properly equipped. With everything underfoot extremely slippery the going was slow and treacherous, the worry being that if I started to slide, there would be no stopping, and I would plummet over the sheer drop that opened up either side. Gripping on to boulders for support, I stopped and pondered which would now be more hazardous - to turn back, or continue along the ridge. Making such slow progress, the other concern was the weather, which if it suddenly changed for the worse could trap me in a blizzard or even an avalanche. I was alone on the mountain, with no mobile phone or means of summoning help, and having told no one of my intended expedition. No alarm would be raised about my absence – not until the day I was due to report back from leave in Aldershot.

I took a deep breath and studied the map, trying to establish what might be the least dangerous route to descend from the ridge. Then, very slowly and carefully, testing every foothold, I

picked my way down the shifting snow and ice, finally arriving with great relief on the road, several hundred feet below. Here I picked up one of the buses taking tourists to and from Fort William. On the way the driver told me that on the previous day, two students on a 'Three Peaks' tour of Snowdon, Scafell and Ben Nevis, had been struck by an avalanche just above us, killing both of them. Back at the hostel, the staff and other travellers were amazed at what I had attempted, without proper gear, or informing anyone of my intentions. I did not tell them about my dream of joining the SAS. I could imagine what they would say. I also now understood what people meant by, 'a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.'

January saw me on a ten-week pre-UK language course at Beaconsfield. Open to nominated Gurkhas from Hong Kong, I found the course extremely useful, and combined with recent practice in English conversation with my Pathfinder colleagues, was able to achieve an A grade pass. Taking PT at Beaconsfield was Olympic athlete Kelly Holmes, later Dame Kelly. Wider knowledge of the English language and many of its mysteries came to me through the Pathfinders and Paras. Unlike many other regiments they comprised soldiers from a patchwork of regions, all with their own varieties of speech – the 'see you Jimmy' of the Scots, the gruff Northern Irish, the lilting Welsh, Cockneys with their slang and wisecracks and the varied pronunciations of Northerners and Southerners. Being a mixed bunch, we all tended to get on. With the odd exception that made it plain they did not think I should be there, and 'gave me grief' (an expression I soon picked up) most made an effort to understand my Nepalese accent, and were good comrades. When an NCO called out 'Hello gooks!' to my numberee and me one day the platoon sergeant quickly told him off. The word in fact meant little to us, having never heard it before.

The Paras like all regiments had their pride. They were 'the best' and didn't hesitate to say so. Any individual who was attached to them was referred to jokingly as 'a hat'. But if anyone seriously thought I didn't belong, it didn't bother me. I had always admired the Paras - tough, no-nonsense guys, I knew the training they gave me would be the best, and stand me in good stead for whatever now lay ahead.

7. Who Dares Wins

What did lie ahead? That was still the big question: would I make it through the Pathfinders, let alone reach the SAS selection? A year after my first HALO I had finally managed to complete the required number of jumps. Then, worried the army might never teach me to drive I had taken private lessons to obtain a licence. I was now the proud owner of an Austin Maestro 'old banger' bought for £500. Air and mobility skills were at least passable. As one of only two Gurkhas training with the Pathfinders I sensed people watching and waiting, some with fingers crossed I didn't slip up, others perhaps expecting it.

Concerned to keep other irons in the fire, I put in a request to attend the next Junior Leadership Cadre in Hong Kong, alongside my numberees. Though taking part in this might arguably hinder my progress in the Pathfinders, I felt at this stage in need of a contingency plan. It was then that my OC – the steely, grey-haired man who had so impressed me on our first meeting – lent his support, assuring me he would write to my CO and exempt me from the JLC, allowing me to continue Pathfinder training uninterrupted. Not only was he as good as his word, but the following April, he called me into his office to offer his congratulations on some good news: I was to be made Lance Corporal. After eight years in the army I had received my first promotion, the OC himself having written a report on my progress.

Lance Corporal was a big step up, and, if my plan for Hereford didn't come off, other courses and opportunities might now open up. My morale having been boosted however, I was more determined than ever to give the SAS my best shot, and towards the end of three years of my service in the Pathfinders asked to apply for the winter selection the following January. The request provoked some surprise. The Brigadier of 5 Airborne Brigade, the overall head of the Paras contacted my Platoon Commander to query it. The Platoon Commander replied that I was serious in my intentions, adding he felt confident I could get through. This seemed to satisfy the boss and my application was forwarded.

The wheels were now well and truly in motion. I knew I had to focus everything on the coming January. I headed up to the Pennines for some tabbing and navigation practice. In terms of mountain experience I now had the Lake District, Land's End, Sheffield and Benidorm in Spain – which away from its lively bars and crowded beaches has some of the finest rock climbing in Europe – under my belt. Christmas I decided I would spend in Brecon, working out on the Black Mountains prior to visiting friends staying nearby. In the New Year I could drive back across the Severn on the newly opened suspension bridge, and report straight to the Hereford selection.

On arrival in Brecon, heavy snow made the slopes difficult to negotiate, and not wanting a repeat of the humbling experience at Fort William, I decided to cut short the climbing and see my friends earlier than intended. Like the Ben Nevis year however, I was not destined to get through Christmas entirely without incident. I had parked my Maestro at the bottom of a hill next to a reservoir, and returning in what was now a sleet storm, I

found the road flooded with the car submerged up to its sills. Finding a phone box, I called an AA man who managed to drag the car from the water, drain the engine and get me started.

That wasn't quite the end of it. Two days before the selection, stuck in a line of traffic waiting to cross the Severn Bridge on the return journey to Brecon, I noticed smoke coming from the engine. Pulling over I once again summoned the AA. Unable to revive the old banger they towed me to the nearest garage, where I spent the night huddled on the back seat in my sleeping bag. Next day, with the engine fixed I took no chances and headed straight for the selection camp. Fortunately the car held out and I arrived in good time.

Though apprehensive, I felt that in some respects the ground had already been laid for me. Pathfinder training, with its relentless endurance testing, navigation skills and particular emphasis on working in small teams, was modelled on SAS operational procedure. Likewise, combat survival, E and E and R2I had all been covered intensively in the PF. Interminable days and nights of chasing or being chased across the rain soaked wilds of Dartmoor, followed by harsh interrogations in 'stress positions' of feet spread, hands above the head etc had drummed in the iron rule: disclose nothing to the enemy other than the big four: name, rank, serial number and date of birth. Force not being the only or most effective way a captor might try to break a man down, we had also been inducted in the 'nice guy' approach, where the interrogator offers sympathy or sustenance, lulling the prisoner into a false sense of security to glean information. Three years with the Pathfinders and reading Andy McNab was my preparation. But was Bravo Two Zero an accurate picture of the SAS? I was about to find out.

Reporting with me to the selection camp for either the SAS or SBS (Special Boat Service) were some two hundred plus men, including one other Gurkha British officer from Hong Kong, whom I had never met before. I had heard that typically a number of candidates would be there to 'tick the box' of having done Hereford selection, not expecting or even wanting to pass. Most seemed friendly and helpful. Late afternoon a guy from the Marines said to me, 'Hey Johnny – there's a brief tonight after scoff in the galley!' I knew some English colloquial expressions, but this was over my head. Translated for me, I realised our evening briefing would follow a meal in the kitchen.

Next morning the first phase of the selection began; almost non-stop endurance testing and navigation. Hour after hour it went on, tabbing from checkpoint to checkpoint over hard terrain, pounding along in cold and rain, light and dark. Guys were dropped from the first day, with no encouragement or coaching from the DS (Directing Staff), who instead tempted you to give up. Anyone injured or falling sick was immediately out, no excuses or second chances. Being physically tough enough was not an issue for most, but illness could knock anyone back, and after a few nights sleeping in the tightly packed, steamed up huts, some people began to get chest infections. Medication was available, but no rest, you had to keep going. Some felt so low they gave up. Dosed up I carried on.

Four weeks of beasting lay ahead; one month, twenty-eight days of hell, tabbing up, down, up, down, on and on over the endless 45 degree often 60 degree hills of the Brecon Beacons and Black Mountains. The most notorious route was known as the VW Valley, the letters' shape denoting the viciously steep inclines, topped by a treacherous boggy plateau covered in dense elephant grass. After clambering breathlessly to the

summit, you then had to wade and lurch your way across the plateau, the oozing mud and water sucking your boots under at every step, until plunging back down the next ankle-breaking slope, only to be confronted by another towering incline – all the while carrying 60 lbs on your back and your rifle at the front. VW stood for something else: Voluntary Withdrawal – exhausted by the punishing terrain many men decided at this point they just couldn't take any more, and pulled out. The final day of this phase involved a 65 km tab, carrying 70 lbs including weapons, plus water ration, within a strict time limit, the route including most of the hills in the Brecon Beacons. By the end of the day we were down to one third of the original candidates.

The next phase of the selection was a total of six weeks in the jungle. There was a fortnight's preparation, which for officers involved brainstorming sessions in indoor classrooms. For us – the 'other ranks' – there was hard training in the snow and ice of Brecon, a complete contrast to the conditions we were about to enter in the furnace of the jungle. At the end of the fortnight, our group now significantly reduced in number left Hereford for Brunei. The first morning out there, a long distance run along the beach was ordered; pleasant sounding enough, but the heat knocked out some guys, who with severe dehydration finished up on IV lines. Entering the jungle our brief was to operate in small teams, maintaining co-operative group discipline day after day, whilst following, and evading, the enemy. Though I already had jungle experience, a month submerged in that environment required stamina, and anyone saying otherwise would be lying. The perpetual discomfort could wear down the fittest. Hilly, virgin jungle, impossible to navigate on the flat, you clambered constantly up and down over the dense undergrowth of roots and rattans. Progress was

arduous, but it was vital to keep track of the enemy team, to see at all times without being seen. You had to push on, and there was little or no rest.

Humidity was high with sudden downpours that soaked us day or night, the screeching and rustle of animal and insect noises meant sleeping in the hammocks was difficult for some. I kept one eye open for the huge snakes that dropped silently from the trees. The canopy of foliage overhead was so thick it obscured any direct sunlight, and the effect was of struggling through a giant hothouse, one in which the plant life had completely taken over. The jungle, a harsh, totally unforgiving environment was the ultimate test of endurance, and those who came through would be recognised as the toughest soldiers in the world. The DS accompanying the teams would be watching at all times, observing not only each man's skills and physical fitness, but also their attitude. Any sign of weakness, any moodiness, self interest or lack of focus would be noted. Here though, unlike the previous phase of the selection, candidates were not informed when they slipped up. Only on emerging from their ordeal four weeks later would anyone find out if they had been failed. Not everyone waited that long. As the punishing days and nights wore on, one by one candidates threw in the towel.

Of those who stayed the course in the jungle phase only half were retained for the SAS and SBS, the other Gurkha officer and myself among them. Selection continued, with further skills testing: Signals, SF (Special Forces) Jumps Course at Brize Norton, Combat Survival Instructor Course including E and E and R2I. I was discovering what the 'Bravo Two Zero' culture was all about. The first criterion was to determine advanced physical fitness under duress – can this man carry out military tasks effectively, marching, running, bearing heavy loads over

long distances for extended periods, in extreme climates and terrain? If yes, that alone was not sufficient. Mere 'racing snakes' were not required. The ethos of team spirit was crucial; anyone attempting to outshine his colleagues, to impress the instructors, show-off or appear 'clever', was quickly weeded out. The expression 'be the grey man' was very apt. You as an individual did not matter, only the job and the welfare of your colleagues, for whom you were expected to make the ultimate sacrifice if and when it came to it.

Among those of us remaining, there was now a quiet sense of having 'made it.' The optimism was rightly tinged with caution. Nothing was certain until the final say so. All were ultra careful, anxious not to do anything careless or stupid at the last minute. Finally the word was given: every one of us had passed the selection and would be formally accepted as members of the Special Air Service or Special Boat Service. At the ceremony the Commanding Officer of 22 SAS handing out our berets congratulated us, adding that getting them was easier than keeping them. It was the proudest day of my life. It was also an historic one for the Gurkhas and the SAS, who for the first time had accepted a Gurkha into their ranks.

A few weekends later I was staying with a friend when there was a phone call for me from my Squadron Sergeant Major. It was unusual to be contacted like this, and I wondered if an exciting deployment might be in the offing. Instead he said, 'Just to let you know, they're going to write about you in The Times.' When the article appeared I was not mentioned by name, but it was quite a long piece, which caught the attention of my former battalion. Hugely appreciative of the success of one of their number, they signalled their warm congratulations.

There was a further surprise in store. Shortly afterwards I received another signal from the Battalion, and from Colonel Commandant Brigade of Gurkhas, General Sir Peter Duffel, informing me that in view of my achievement I had been nominated for the Prince of Wales Khukuri. This was an annual award normally given to a senior NCO 'Best Performer of the Year' in the 2nd Gurkha Rifles – never before a corporal. I was bowled over. The signal also advised I would be going to Highgrove House. I thought for a moment – Highgrove – wasn't that the Prince of Wales's home? I was to be presented there with the award by the Prince in person. The General gave directions to meet him in a pub, from where he drove us the few miles to Highgrove. The presentation was an unforgettable occasion, and a great honour for me. In some jobs there might be a risk of such things 'going to your head'. Not so the British Army. Any possibility of my getting conceited was quickly pre-empted by my politer colleagues referring to me now as 'Golden Boy', the less polite 'Golden B******s. It was always with a good-natured grin. I knew they were genuinely pleased for me.

Conventional soldiering in the ranks meant obeying orders. SAS soldiering demanded planning, decision-making, initiative, judgment, and co-operation on the ground. Orders were not issued as such; each member of a four or five man team – commander, signals, demo, linguist/liaison for example, knew his task inside out, and carried it out smoothly and efficiently. The team was a composite, oblivious to rank. As one motto ran: 'If you are worthy of rank you don't need it, if you don't need it why wear it?' A clearer message was perhaps conveyed by four qualities expected of an SAS operative: Selflessness, Classlessness, Humour and Humility. Through its unparalleled training the Service also instilled a unique belief

in one's capabilities – an absolute will to survive and win, a sense of assurance that the SAS level of professionalism would get you through anything, and confidence to carry out the most challenging of missions, whenever and wherever deployed.

Between ops and incessant training, three years with Hereford flew by quicker than I would ever have imagined, and at the end of it all I found myself at a fork in the road: should I stay in this exciting, elite unit, or take the considerable skills I had acquired there and put them to good use elsewhere? My boyhood yearning to honour my father by equalling his military career and rank still lay very close to my heart, and back in the Gurkhas that might now be achievable. Furthermore, someone with the knowledge and experience I had been given would surely be of benefit there, as well as inspiring the younger boys to work hard and do well. On these two criteria I made my choice, and after consultation with my superiors at Hereford made arrangements to return to the fold of my old battalion.

The time I had spent with the Special Air Service had been amazing – first for having simply been accepted, and then for the high-octane excitement of the operations I was involved in, activities that for obvious reasons I am not at liberty to disclose. And to be taught the top secret, hands-on contingency plans and procedures for dealing with major civilian and military emergencies, threats to VIPS, key installations and national security felt an enormous honour and responsibility, and I remain indebted to Hereford and the British Army for this. Whatever people might read about in fiction or so-called true-life accounts, the reality is that to be as effective and impressive as they undoubtedly are, Britain's special forces must remain highly confidential about their activities. There is one thing I can reveal however; those I served with in the SAS were among the finest bunch of men in the world.

8. D-Day Bosnia:

The Biggest Deployment Since WW2

In Church Crookham, the British commanders extended me a warm welcome back. My Gurkha masters on the other hand seemed wary; fearful that with the experience I now had of life outside I might upset the traditions and hierarchy of the Brigade by giving the youngsters 'ideas'. In a sense they were right. One idea I wanted to give the boys concerned the 'orderly system'. I had first observed it in Hong Kong, where Gurkhas were nominated to clean and polish officers' uniforms and boots and perform other tasks for them. At the weekends too, in Hong Kong in particular, boys would go to the officers' houses to do domestic chores and odd jobs. This was not exactly a voluntary arrangement; in fact it was expected. Occasionally a British officer would pay the boy something, but these duties were usually carried out in the hope of being granted some ERE to the UK – and the much higher salary that went with it - or other favour.

Though a long established practice, to me the orderly system just did not seem right. Gurkhas trained hard to be soldiers in the field, not servants, and our spare time if any I felt should be our own. The orderly system was part of the old culture of deference, which went surely beyond the obligations of rank. Playing their part in the tradition, Gurkha officers seeking to impress their paymasters were known to buy gifts for them, and lay on lavish hospitality when a commanding officer visited.

Overseas and in the UK, there remained a distinction between British and Gurkhas, which both sides felt uncomfortable to breach. If I were seen reading a book or newspaper, my Gurkha colleagues would pass some remark about wasting my time. I would tell them they should not waste their time polishing the boots of the bosses.

Meanwhile, around the world, officers and other ranks, soldiers and civilians alike had all been following the dramatic events unfolding in Yugoslavia. The news was frequently appalling, with reports of the slaughter of innocent people, described by the perpetrators as 'ethnic cleansing'. Members of all communities were suffering in this conflict, and needed help. When word came through that a huge NATO force was being put together for the job, and that our battalion would be going in with them on the ground, I had to say I felt a surge of excitement and pride at the prospect of playing a part in such a major international operation.

At the same time it was hard, understandably, for many of the Gurkhas to grasp what this conflict was all about, and the feeling all round was that we were about to be entrusted with a new kind of responsibility. Since World War Two, the Malay campaign in the 1960s, and later the Falklands, there had been no major theatre involving the Brigade; a few had deployed in the Gulf War, though, not being armour trained, not in the front line. This represented a long gap in large operational experience; Gurkhas were good fighters, few doubted that, but this was to be a peacekeeping mission, requiring extra-military skills – judgement, interpersonal communication, sensitivity to differing cultural groups and their fears and prejudices. We all knew the awful things that had been going on in Bosnia, but

A panoramic view of my village in Nepal.

With my jubilant 'numberees' enjoying a day out after passing selection, prior to flying to Hong Kong to begin basic training.

Adventure training as part of military exercises in New Zealand 1989. Behind me is the Volcano Mount Tongariro.

With the Operation Raleigh Venturer team set up camp in the jungle in Sabah, Borneo Island, Malaysia.

Jumping from a C130 during military freefall training over Pau, France.

Geronimo!

SAS accepts first Gurkha into regiment

by Hugh McManners Defence Correspondent

FOR THE first time in its 54-year history, the Special Air Service (SAS) has accepted a Gurkha into its elite ranks. The move coincides with reports that the fearsome Nepalese soldiers are to be drafted in to help stem a manpower shortage in British regiments.

The Gurkha volunteered to join 22 SAS Regiment. He completed the initial selection process at the regiment's headquarters in Hereford, followed by jungle training and testing in Brunei.

The man, who has not been named for security reasons, comes from the west of Nepal, from the mountainous Annapurna region. Before joining the SAS he served as a paratrooper in 5 Airborne Brigade's Pathfinder platoon, one of the freefall parachuting teams that spearhead airborne operations to mark out drop zones for the main parachute force.

Gurkhas have fought with the British Army since the early 19th century, developing a fearsome reputation for bravery and for use of the kukri, their trademark 18in fighting knife. There are Gurkha squadrons with British engineer, transport and signals regiments, but until now no Gurkha has served in the SAS. Ministry of Defence sources say this was for a combination of historical and military reasons.

Until 1970 the Gurkhas served entirely in the Far East. They fought in the Falklands war in 1982 as part of 5 Infantry Brigade. Over the past few years individual volunteers have become paratroopers. Several have gone on to pass the selection tests for the paratroopers' crack Pathfinder platoon, a traditional stepping stone to the special forces.

Until recently the army had reservations about the wider deployment of Gurkhas, worrying about language difficulties and their adaptability, particularly outside the distinct culture of a Gurkha unit.

They were also considered to be excellent soldiers provided plans did not change, but lacked the flexibility that is the hallmark of SAS operations.

With no tradition or experience of service with the SAS, Gurkhas did not ask to be put forward for selection until recently.

The SAS has often accepted fighting men from other countries, particularly Commonwealth nations such as Australia, New Zealand and Fiji. The last Fijian ceased serving with the SAS in the mid-1980s after overseas recruitment was stopped.

Although Gurkhas are paid less than British soldiers while in the Far East, they are brought up to parity when serving in Britain. The Gurkha who has just joined the SAS will also receive first tour special forces pay, inducement money that serves to recognise the arduous, uncomfortable and dangerous nature of the work.

The Times announces my entry into the SAS. Photo taken the day I was badged.

I am honoured to be presented with the Prince of Wales Khukuri award by His Royal Highness at Highrove House.

The scars of war, Bosnia 1996.

My platoon with confiscated weapons soon after our arrival in Kosovo.

The waiting game massing in an open wheat field near Skopje, armed and ready to enter Kosovo to beat the Russians to Pristina airport.

My numberee and I receive our commission to Lieutenant Queens Gurkha Officer. On the same day, intake 2004, seen behind, attend their attestation parade.

Fire Support Group with Major Roberts in FOB Arnhem.

Interacting with local Afghans during Operation Pulk Wahel.

Our follow-up troops landing in the Baluchi Valley during Operation Spin Ghar.

Gurkhas sweep through the valley during Operation Breshna.

Overlooking the Baluchi Valley, one of my patrols captures an enemy position, together with a large quantity of arms and ammunition.

With half the recce team outside Dutch patrol base on completion of Operation Spin Ghar.

Operation Breshna convoy en route.

The convoy approaches Kandahar at dusk.

Gurkhas on high alert at JTAC Hill.

JTAC Hill the southernmost observation post of coalition forces, and a strategic location covering the bridge over the Helmand River.

With Lieutenant Wales Sahib at FOB Delhi.

Gurkhas at Garmsir overlook enemy positions after occupying Objective Hamburger

the rights, wrongs, claims and counter claims of the various factions were complex, as were the terms of the Dayton agreement - reflecting the chaos and strife it aimed to resolve.

During the run up, military historians were drafted in to brief us on the background, language and traditions of the country we were about to enter. In the limited time available before deployment, the academics did their best to explain the three hundred years of internecine struggle that had culminated in the terrible bloodshed of the last four. At the end of the lectures I was at least now slightly better informed about the politics of Yugoslavia, and why people had been killing each other. In World War Two and the Gulf War, there had been a clear and identifiable enemy; the question of who we would be going in against here, and why, seemed much more ambiguous, not least for the number of different factions involved. Since the death of Tito in 1980, tensions within the country had been mounting. In 1981 when the majority Albanian population demanded Kosovo be recognised as a separate republic, there had been violent confrontations with the Serbian authorities. A harsh crackdown by the Yugoslav Army and Serbian police brought Kosovo effectively under martial law.

Kosovo was still in theory an autonomous state however, and a glimmer of hope came with the Winter Olympics of 1984, hosted in Sarajevo and offering as many thought a chance for peace and harmony. It was to be short lived. The Serbs in Kosovo remained resentful of the Albanians, whose country bordered theirs, and the man arguably responsible for fanning the flames of this slumbering fire was Slobodan Milosevic, who in 1986 came to prominence as leader of the Serbian Central Committee. As often in nationalist politics, the past was used to incite feelings about the present. He told the Serbs that no one should beat them, and on the 28th June 1989, the

600th anniversary of a major defeat of the Serbs by the Turks in Kosovo, returned to the region and delivered a speech to an estimated one million people, which included the following words: 'Six centuries later we are again in battles, and facing battles...they are not armed, although such battles cannot be excluded yet.' Under Milosovic's orders Kosovo's autonomy was revoked, and the country was swallowed into Serbia.

1989 however was also the year the Berlin Wall fell, adding to the growing independence movement throughout Eastern Europe. In Yugoslavia the desire for freedom wasn't such a simple matter. Croatia and Slovenia were officially recognised as independent by the EU in 1991. Croatia's population was around 12% Serb, and within a few months of independence the Serbs were engaged in so-called 'ethnic cleansing' of Croats. Milosovic endorsed the Serbs' right to exist as a nation irrespective of their geographical residency; with the increasing fragmentation of Yugoslavia looking likely he declared that, '... the borders of Serbia must be redefined, because a future Serb state must include all areas where Serbs live.' When Bosnia-Herzogovina took its turn to vote for independence in 1992, Serbian militia surrounded Sarajevo and launched attacks on non-Serbs in Bosnia. U.N. sanctions were imposed on Serbia and backed up by naval patrols, while French UNPROFOR (United Nations Protection Force) troops took over Sarajevo airport. Serbian concentration camps were discovered in Bosnia and a no-fly zone was imposed over the country.

Keeping the peace, while addressing the rights and freedoms of the various factions in what was now being called 'the former Yugoslavia' proved extremely difficult; the seal of authority that during Tito's years had kept ethnic tensions tightly bottled was about to blow. Even under the close protection of the UNPROFOR troops no one was safe, including the Bosnian

government's Deputy Prime Minister, whom the Serbs managed to take out in cold blood. An early joint plan proposed ethnic cantons for Bosnia, which the Bosnian Serbs rejected. As the ethnic cleansing continued, the U.N Security Council established an International Criminal Tribunal and declared 'U.N. Safe Havens' in Sarajevo, Srebrenica, Bihac, Gorazde, Tuzla and Zepa.

These havens were not in practice very safe, as the horrific killing of sixty-eight people in a mortar attack on a Sarajevo marketplace proved. It was following another attack, on Gorazde, fifty odd miles from Sarajevo that the U.N. went on the offensive, bombing a Serb artillery command centre. The Serbs retaliated, shooting down a British Harrier, taking U.N. peacekeepers hostage, and, blatantly reclaiming weapons previously surrendered, firing on the citizens of Sarajevo. Ignoring all warnings from the U.N. the Serbian militia proceeded to shell the other havens, seizing hundreds more peacekeepers to use as human shields against NATO air strikes. The killing of civilians, many in cold blood, went on. After Srebrenica fell to the Serbs more than 7,000 men and boys were slaughtered.

NATO responded with a massive air assault, the largest in its history, forcing the Serb leaders Mladic and Karadzic to agree to a pull back. After more than three and a half years the 'Siege of Sarajevo' appeared to be over. If thóse responsible for the bloodshed were expecting any kind of peace with honour however, there was a shock in store for them, for in August 1995 a U.N. tribunal in The Hague indicted both Mladic and Karadizic for war crimes. On November 1st that same year, at a U.S. Air Force base in Dayton Ohio, an agreement on division of territory was eventually reached between Slobodan Milosevic the President of former Yugoslavia, the Bosnian

President Alija Izetbegovic, and Croation President Franjo Tudjman. The three also pledged they would surrender those indicted for war crimes.

The architect of the Dayton Agreement was American envoy Richard Holbrooke and after being signed by all parties in Paris on 14th December 1995, the war was deemed to be at an end. The work required to implement the terms of the agreement however was only just beginning; with many of those in former Yugoslavia believed to be dissatisfied at the outcome, along with all the post-conflict bitterness and resentments that were bound to fester, a significant international force was likely to be needed on the ground.

Our own commanders briefed us on how we would operate, and what we might encounter, and from this none of us expected an outright war as such. We took off just before Christmas. Being my first real deployment, as the aircraft climbed I felt a great thrill to be 'going' at last. It was dark by the time we touched down in Sarajevo, and only in the morning, as we joined the convoy of tanks and equipment heading out from the old city, did we get our first glimpse of the harsh Balkan winter, everything blanketed in thick snow, making the minefields, marked or unmarked, that littered the country even more treacherous. There was a sense of anticipation, along with slight butterflies in the stomach among the boys; no one knew for sure how the Bosnian Serbs were going to react to such a large-scale force arriving in their midst.

The snow did little to disguise the destruction that had been wreaked on the country however – the bombed out buildings and collapsed walls everywhere, the periodic lines of ragged looking people turning out to welcome us, though the Serbs were less visible among them. One could not help reflecting on how well, after the devastation of the Second World War Tito

had managed to unite the disparate people of this land, who had gone on to live and work together for over forty years as Yugoslavians, building among other things one of the world's most productive steel factories. True it had been a communist state, without the freedoms of the West, but an outwardly peaceable country nonetheless. Slobodan Milosovich, in just one speech it seemed, had lit a fuse that was to turn village against village, neighbour against neighbour, unleashing a firestorm of hatred and violence that in a matter of months had all but destroyed that country.

Arrived at our first operating base we received our briefings. My Hereford experience was seemingly being taken into account now, as, over the following months I found myself tasked with some of the more involved and interesting operations. These included visiting the faction commanders, turning up at their HQs – town halls etc – and ensuring they were aware of where they and their groups should move to, namely the demilitarised zones designated in the Dayton plan. Some individuals had to be addressed quite forcefully if they refused to go, or would not allow their arms and munitions to be inspected. If they remained stubborn it meant moving up the chain of command and contacting their military or political leaders.

We had been given a mandate to move without hindrance throughout the country. This did not mean there was never opposition, or hidden dangers. Coming to the end of one night excursion, just before dawn we were making our way in a patrol vehicle along the banks of the River Sanna. On one side lay the Serbian front line, on the other the Bosnian Muslims, with the Muslim Croats also nearby. It was January, and the ground was blanketed in snow. Approaching a roughly made bridge, its contours blurred beneath the snow, I began to feel uneasy. The road ahead looked innocent enough, the surrounding

hills quiet. In modern conventional warfare, minefields must according to international law be marked, and there were no such indications visible. For some reason though, I stopped the vehicle. A moment later gunfire opened up over our heads. The general understanding was that this was a post-conflict scenario; apart from occasional random shooting we had not expected a fight. After the gunfire came shouting; it turned out to be the Bosnian Muslims, not attacking but trying to warn us that we had indeed been driving towards an unmarked minefield, laid by themselves some time ago.

Another of our roles was to recce with and support the victims of the war, escorting refugees back to their homes, many of them needing reassurance. I was surprised to see how many men had travelled from overseas to support their Muslim brothers in Bosnia, some from as far as Indonesia and Brazil. The more hard-line fighters among them took some persuading to return to their own countries, or at least leave the area. Among the main three factions, Muslims, Serbs and Croats, the majority welcomed us; some of the Serbs could be arrogant, though most were by now battle worn and ready to withdraw from the front line. Muslims would frequently ask about friends and former neighbours who had been forced to flee to other areas.

It remained surprising that people who had previously lived in close proximity had suddenly begun shedding blood. One act of violence presumably led to a reprisal, and then another, and once the fuse was lit the explosion followed. Unpicking the threads of who had done what could be complex. Tasked to gather intelligence on war criminals, we were told stories of shootings and atrocities that had taken place locally, sometimes

naming the culprits, though some of these reports might be hearsay or false accusations. Everything had to be listened to in trying to establish the truth.

We visited the front line, surveying and recording damage to infrastructure – houses, roads and bridges – and identifying locations for our oncoming troops. Occasionally we heard the crackle of gunfire in the distance, but the main danger was landmines, thousands had been laid, and every so often there were casualties. War damage to the road surfaces had left large potholes and craters, making driving difficult. In the exceptionally cold weather, lorries and other military vehicles skidded into each other on the ice, causing logistical hold-ups as well as injuries. For a while we operated close to the large town of Bihac, amid mountainous, snowy terrain, over the course of the winter visiting the various garrisons, inspecting arms, ammunition and conditions.

One strategic feature in this area had become a dramatic, scarred landmark in the history of the conflict. Some years ago the Yugoslav government had embarked on the construction of a vast airbase here, its total area around half the size of Bihac itself, with an airstrip and hangers built deep into the side of the mountains. With a total cost equating to several billion pounds, trillions in today's terms, the inner base had been designed to withstand a nuclear bomb attack. In the recent conflict the retreating Serbs had laid explosive charges in the base, destroying everything in and outside the bunkers, the tremors from the deafening avalanche of rock and debris being felt for a distance of several miles.

This operation had been in many ways a new experience for the Gurkhas – given the first opportunity in decades to really show their professionalism, and in a more rounded capacity than direct war-fighting – refurbishing schools and hospitals,

escorting displaced persons back to their homes, communicating with and learning the cultures of the various indigenous peoples of former Yugoslavia. The same broadening of skills applied in working with the numerous other nationalities making up the NATO forces. Some of the younger overseas troops – Canadians, Dutch and US – seemed never to have heard of the Gurkhas, and on first encountering us would ask what we were doing in British Army uniform.

The deployment into Bosnia was massive, the biggest troop movement into a single country since the Second World War, seeking to re-establish the physical and social infrastructure of civil society, and to reassure the inhabitants that the rule of law would henceforth protect them. The difficult operations carried out by troops of many nations under harsh winter weather, had contributed a great deal towards this objective, and taught the soldiers on the ground much in the process. As Gurkhas, there was a certain advantage in our physical appearance; the locals tending to regard us less as intruders from the West, more as neutral peacekeepers. Any doubts that we were versatile, able to adapt and operate anywhere in the world had been cleared up. For many of us it was now time to head back to the UK, review what had been achieved and what had to be learned from the experience, and prepare ourselves for the next call of duty wherever it might be.

9. Kosovo

After the return from Bosnia I attended the Platoon Sergeant Battle Course (PSBC), hoping a relevant promotion would follow. One of my British superiors came to me with a query on this matter. My Gurkha masters, having been asked for their opinion, had commented that though I was a good soldier, I didn't have the 'right tactics.' The right caste was perhaps more accurate. To their credit the British could see through this, and in due course I was made Platoon Sergeant.

Keen to maintain personal fitness, in the summer I took part in Trail Walker UK, a 100 km walk over the South Downs finishing in Brighton. I completed just shy of 10 hours - 9 hrs 48 minutes to be precise, raising money for my nominated charity the Gurkha Welfare Trust. Established in 1969 this was the principal British charity dedicated to the provision of aid to Gurkha ex-servicemen and their dependents, mainly Second World War veterans without military pensions.

Exercises and competitions now accrued; an overnight operation leading one hundred men over the snow-covered Scottish mountains, with precision map reading and timed rendezvous, and at the end of 1998 the March and Shoot event. Held at Bisley, March and Shoot was run by 5 Airborne Brigade with teams competing on an overland course of obstacles, moving at an aggressive pace while shooting at a series of targets. As sergeant I trained my platoon hard in preparation, and when the big day came and we won, there was a huge feeling of pride for all of us.

It was pleasing to observe these kinds of successes getting noticed by the younger boys in the battalion. Seeing a Gurkha winning competitions, gaining promotion, showing commitment and a generally positive attitude, the aspirations of others were being raised, and a few of my juniors were feeling encouraged to follow in my footsteps by applying for the Pathfinders, and to seriously consider other opportunities, in and outside of the battalion.

It was time for two months leave. As the plane rose leaving the cold of another British January behind, little did I know what awaited me in Nepal. After an affectionate welcome from my mother, brother and sisters, there was the usual round of visits to friends, neighbours and relations close and distant. At one house we called at I knew hardly anyone there, but my mum seemed particularly keen to socialise. I was aware this was the home of relatives of my dad's from some way back. When he was very young both his parents had died, after which he was cared for by his uncle and aunt. Later though there had been mutual estrangement between the two sides of the family, which had saddened my father. I wondered why we were making such an effort to meet these people now.

I was about to find out. Once inside, I was steered to sit beside a particular girl who I gathered was a distant cousin. It was unusual for a boy and girl to be seated together at a social gathering. From the discussions that ensued around us it was soon obvious what was on the cards. The girl's mother was there with her, and she and my mum had it seemed already been talking while I was away. The girl seemed very nice, but since we had never seen each other before it felt awkward to start a conversation. When we left the house my mum spoke to me about marriage. Apparently the girl's mother had intimated to my mum that she was seeking a 'perfect husband' for her

daughter. My mum's caste might normally have precluded such an approach from this family, but my army career tipped the balance, upping my value as a suitable boy. My mum had taken the hint, and negotiations had got underway. Now as they say, 'the ball was in my court'. I told my mum I couldn't decide anything yet. A few days went by, and she asked again. Eventually I said yes, I would marry the girl. Mum was overjoyed. My stepbrother was pleased too, as I knew my father would have been, to witness in this union the two sides of his family joining together again after so long.

The first port of call was the Pundit (priest), to ask his advice on a date for the wedding. In Nepal the priest's decision on this holds sway, since he must first consult his astrological tables to find a propitious time, when the moon and other heavenly bodies are in perfect harmony for the couple. He came back with a date a few weeks away, so I would be married within the stay of my current leave. According to custom I acquired a full set of jewellery to bestow on my future bride. Nepalese weddings take place over two or more days, and since the first part was to be at my bride's family home in Pokhara, I arranged hire of a bus to take everyone from our village there. Going with us was the Pundit who would conduct the formal proceedings. This was to be the furthest anyone in our village had travelled to a wedding, which was creating quite a stir.

Dressed in my traditional Thakuri garments, with my bride to be in those of her caste, we assembled at her house, and gathered round a table bearing a small banana tree and statues of the Hindu deities. The priest led us in worship, asking the gods for their blessings, and for good fortune and fruitfulness to be bestowed upon the couple. Then came the handing over ceremony, the family of the bride entrusting their daughter from this moment on to her husband. Having made my solemn

promise to love and care for her, I dipped my finger into the red sindhur powder, reached out and touched the bride's upper forehead, the imprint symbolising she was now my wife.

The following day I took my wife on the bus back to my village, along with relatives and friends. This time it was not a hired bus, but the normal service, and we had to walk some distance from the nearest stop. My mum had adorned the house with flowers and decorations, to welcome the bride to our home as one of us. There was a short ceremony of stepping over rice grains laid in the doorway to enter the house, and then the party could begin. Though not obligatory, I had decided to hold a full-blown affair for everyone. With family and villagers all contributing to the provision and cooking of fresh meats, and other home made dishes there was plentiful good food. The women drank only soft drinks, though Coke etc was not then available, and for the men there was Raksi, a strong local spirit distilled from millet, as well as some bottles of commercial whiskey and vodka.

Nepalese weddings were not followed by any kind of honeymoon as in the West. The day after the ceremony both bride and groom would normally be out working in the fields again. I had though planned to take my wife and my mum on a two-week pilgrimage to the temple at Muktinath in Nepal. It was a long journey, and when we were one day from our destination, we stopped overnight at a place called Jomsom. It was while staying here that I heard the news on the radio that NATO had made a strike on Kosovo, and there were plans underway for a ground force insertion involving British troops. Nothing was yet official, but I felt obliged to tell my wife and mum that I might have to cut short my leave. In the event, no orders came through, and I was able to stay in Nepal for

my full period of leave. It was however confirmed that once preparations were complete my unit would be among those going to Kosovo.

Newly married I flew back to the UK with my wife, where we were allocated quarters together. At Church Crookham, 5 Airborne Brigade was in urgent preparation. The news that we would be deploying in just fourteen days time came as a big shock when I told my wife. Not only that, but she had some news of her own – she was pregnant. To have me go off so soon after our wedding, and now with our child on the way, and not knowing what dangers the deployment might entail, was naturally very upsetting. The other Gurkha wives were very supportive and I knew that she would be well looked after in my absence, but without question the next few months were going to be an ordeal for her.

Meanwhile I was immediately embarked on training and preparation for the forthcoming operation, beginning with a series of Tactical Air Landing Operations (TALO) exercises, in terrain replicating what we could expect in Kosovo. The exercise locations included the Jura Mountains in Scotland, and Salisbury Plain. During these exercises there was nervous anticipation about the real thing, about which we did our best to reassure one another. 'Sergeant ****' remarked my OC on one occasion, 'surely if we have to land at Pristina airport in these conditions it will be dangerous?' 'Don't worry Sahib,' I replied, 'you won't be the first to land.'

In fact the plan was to land in neighbouring Macedonia, prepare our arms and equipment, and on D-Day cross the mountains into Kosovo through the Kacanik Defile. We would be among the lead elements of KFOR (Kosovo Force) a 20,000 strong multi-national force. Other elements of KFOR would meanwhile be inserting from other points along the border.

The situation we would be entering was dire. The Albanian KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army), dubbed a terrorist faction and believed to use child soldiers as young as thirteen, was still armed and fighting, and though an estimated 1 million people had fled the country, many remained trapped, fearing for their lives. Infrastructure was almost non-existent, with homes and bridges destroyed, schools and hospitals closed and water and electricity scarce. TV and radio was also shut down, and many roads thought to be mined.

It was an emotional moment when I said farewell to my wife, and joined my colleagues for the flight out. Safely down in Macedonia we began our prepping quietly and efficiently, until one day everyone started rushing this way and that about the camp in a state of high alert, and looking very concerned. It seemed an order had come through from somewhere on high, that we were to take off again and fly directly into Kosovo's main airport, Pristina. The order went on to stress that the Russians, who were making their way there overland from the other direction, must at all costs be beaten to it, and furthermore, if we met with any resistance from anyone – including the Russians – we were to open fire on them.

No wonder the frantic activity, as well as the worried looks on some people's faces. If this was carried out, it could cause huge problems, and if there was an exchange of fire with Russian troops, it was anyone's guess where that might lead. A huge amount of arms was already being assembled, flattening the wheat fields around us in preparation for the airlift to Pristina, I said to my OC 'Are you sure this is correct Sahib?' He replied that this was the order, and that we should do whatever we were told. Then at the height of all the activity came a sudden pause. General Mike Jackson had sent a signal to the White House that something had gone wrong. Talks were urgently scheduled

between the NATO commanders and the Russians in Pristina for a couple of days' time. A possible Third World War had been averted, and the US commander who had ordered us to fight the Russians for Pristina, was discreetly removed.

So as per the original plan, on D-Day minus one we assembled overnight at the Kacanik Defile on the border between Kosovo and Macedonia, and made ready to move in. My platoon had been detailed as personal security to the commander of 5th Airborne Brigade, and as such we were placed almost at the front of the queue of vehicles. As first light came, the shadowy shapes either side of the valley solidified into looming mountainous terrain against the dawn sky. At H-Hour hour the operation began, as a spy plane droned in high above, followed by fighter planes, then Chinooks carrying the 5th Airborne Paratroopers, flanked by Apaches. On the ground the first engine started, then another and another, the low rumble growing louder as the long line of trucks, jeeps, tanks, armoured cars and personnel carriers chugged one by one into life, and the convoy began to move.

The Brigade of Gurkhas being at the front, the Brigadier taking us in first, we crossed the border on foot into Kosovo. The mood was tense, alert, no one knowing quite what, if anything, was going to happen. Positioned a short distance behind our lines, an indirect weapons system was primed and ready to fire on any resistance. On television screens across the globe, people, most anxiously our loved ones back home, would be following every stage of this event. It was an emotional experience on the ground too, thinking about what had happened in the land we were now entering, and with it a sense of drama about the occasion, the eyes of the world focused on us, proud to be part of this large and momentous operation.

Initial intelligence had indicated that the Serbs might shell the route in advance of us, making it impassable, though this proved not to be the case. Some sort of chaos had likewise been anticipated in the early stages of insertion – anti-personnel mines or other resistance - but more up to date intelligence reports put the level of threat lower. As we proceeded, gunfire could be heard periodically in the distance, but none so far directed at us. The main hazard was NATO's own ordnance from previous air strikes – half-buried and unexploded cluster bombs, which could go off if driven over. We continued to roll on, passing through villages and farms, where the inhabitants came out to welcome us, the Albanian civilians often jubilantly, the Serbs clearly not pleased by our arrival.

By late afternoon we were approaching Pristina. As dusk fell the convoy split up, my company going with the Brigade Commander to the airfield, which the Russians were guarding, having already arrived. General Jackson wanted to meet as soon as possible with the Russian general, and ordered our Brigadier to make contact and arrange it. As we drove up to the airfield, we were met by a roadblock, with the Russian guards reluctant to let us pass. We pushed on however, and the Brigadier managed to negotiate a meeting on the airfield between Jackson and the Russian general for that evening.

As scheduled, we formed a cordon around the HLS (Helicopter Landing Site) in order to keep the journalists and TV crews, of whom there were quite a few, at a distance. As the NATO helicopter touched down and Jackson stepped out, I recognised some of the soldiers travelling with him, and later got the chance to say hello to them. After the meeting, Jackson was flown out again, while the Brigadier and our platoon were offered overnight accommodation in the Russian barracks, an unusual gesture, which we gratefully accepted, along with a

supper of soup and bread rolls. In the morning the Brigadier and his team moved into Pristina, while my platoon returned to our colleagues in 1 RGR Battle Group, ready to set about our tasks.

While most of the Paras were being put in and around Pristina, our AOR (Area of Responsibility) was located some fifty or sixty km south of there. 'A' Coy found and occupied a deserted barn, where we set about making an HQ. After shifting the old farm machinery and equipment that was strewn around, we had a fairly habitable space, which would become both our operational base and logistical hub for distributing stores and equipment to other companies. From the barn, we carried out patrols over the surrounding villages and homesteads. By this time, displaced Albanians had begun returning to their former homes in the area. The Serbs, now without support from Belgrade, had begun to flee back there, leaving those that remained a dwindling presence among the resurgent Albanian population. This Serb minority were now coming under threat, some having their homes burnt out, or being shot at by Albanians in reprisal for past atrocities by the Serbian militia. To curb this we set up observation posts around the villages, and occupied any empty or isolated properties.

Another distinct community were the gypsies, who being a vulnerable minority had sided with the Serbs when the latter were dominant in the region at the height of the conflict. For this they were resented, and also now targeted by the Albanians. These three groups were fairly easy to tell apart, the Serbs being white, fair or Northern European looking, the Albanians olive skinned and Mediterranean and the gypsies mostly had jet-black hair. The Gurkhas seemed well liked by all sides, possibly because as in Bosnia, they saw us as neutral. Whatever the reason, there were few problems mixing with the

locals, so long as we could communicate; if we only had a Serb interpreter available when visiting an Albanian house, or vice versa, the occupants would be highly suspicious of anything we told them.

We in turn had to question the honesty of some of the locals – when it came to so-called 'weapons harvesting' for example. Posters, written in the various ethnic languages, were displayed in the villages announcing that all automatic and semi-automatic weapons, and their ammunition, must be handed in to NATO personnel. Farmers and others were allowed to keep shotguns and hunting rifles, provided a valid licence was inspected and photographed and the gun owner's details recorded. As in Bosnia, the weapons harvest was to turn up thousands of arms and ammunition, but not always without repeated questioning or a search.

Other companies were performing similar or other roles in different parts of the country. The Queen's Gurkha Engineers were involved in clearing stray bombs and ammunition. Two men, one a young British troop commander, the other a Gurkha staff sergeant called Balram Rai were dealing with a cluster bomb one day when it exploded, killing them both. These were the first British casualties so far in the campaign. The tragic incident was also to prove revelatory, after reports in the UK that the benefits Balram's family would receive were considerably less than those of the British officer. Had there been some bureaucratic error or confusion over the facts?

Allegation and counter allegation went back and forth, and one British newspaper took up the baton to find out the truth. It was soon established that the different sums of money publicised were indeed the official entitlements of each man, according to their terms and conditions of service, for the Gurkhas always less favourable. Rank was not the determining factor, and no

one disputed the bravery and sacrifice of both men. Allied to the GESO (Gurkha Ex-Servicemen's Organisation) campaign over TACOS differentials, the story rolled on. The media frenzy was such that Tony Blair, then British Prime Minister, finally stepped in and announced that the widow of the Gurkha soldier would receive the same payout as his British colleague. It was to prove a small milestone; as time went on the MOD would continue to bring Gurkha TACOS into parity with those of the British.

Whilst my colleagues and I had to keep our minds focused on the job, inevitably we thought too of our families. When far from home as almost any soldier will tell you, there is no greater joy than hearing a loved one's voice. At the time there was no welfare phone provided by the army, and none of us, among the Gurkhas at least, had a mobile. To help morale, calls home for serving British personnel in Kosovo had been provided courtesy of BT. This was great news, but still meant finding a call box, and there were none in the rural area in which we found ourselves. I was concerned to speak to my wife, particularly as she had been so upset on our parting, and of course, she was expecting our first child. There were phones in Pristina, but going in was forbidden except on specific deployment. However after conducting a risk assessment, one quiet day I decided to take a chance, and took my boys into the city in our truck so we could all call home. When some of the other units heard about this there was a degree of envy, though none as far as I know grassed us up. Later on we struck a deal with a British officer to use his mobile from time to time, agreeing to pay him for the calls when we all got back home.

The objective of the peacekeeping forces was to reduce violence – through the weapons harvests, and maintaining a watchful eye on the community. But despite regular patrols,

observation posts and a visible presence in the area, it was impossible for us to be everywhere, or to see everything that went on. A few months into our insertion into Kosovo, there was a nasty incident in one of the villages, in which a small group of Serbian farmers and children were herded into a remote field and shot dead. The murderers were believed to be Albanians. This was deeply traumatic for the local community, and an embarrassment for the NATO forces. Our company was immediately deployed to the village, where the atmosphere was tense with shock, grief and anger. No one seemed to know precisely who the perpetrators were, or whether they would strike again, and our brief was to protect the other inhabitants, especially during the combined funeral that was held for the victims, attended by large crowds of mourners.

Tasked with catching war criminals, we had to listen to all reports, allegations and rumours. People would show us photographs, give names and descriptions and tell us such and such is a 'bad guy', but rarely was there any real proof. We remained in the village for a month before being replaced by a Finnish battalion. Our next stop was the Company HQ in the barn, then on to guarding the local prison – both to prevent escapes and protect the inmates from rival factions. After a stint there we returned to the village where the shootings had taken place, thereafter rotating between these three locations until our withdrawal in October

To sum up the tour, it had not been the full-scale war we had trained for and expected had the Serbs stayed and fought. But without the NATO presence of the past few months there would undoubtedly have been more killings. The largely successful weapons harvest, and calmer mood of the locals when we left, compared to the anxious, smouldering atmosphere we had encountered on our arrival, was some testimony to a job well

done on the part of our battle group. The fact it could have been done better – avoiding the kind of tragedy that befell the Serbian farmers and their families - was perhaps down to available resources.

As for our own experiences out there, I for one had learnt to 'expect the unexpected' in dealing with people and situations, however calm and innocent they might appear. The time had flown by quickly, and as we boarded the plane back I was of course looking forward to seeing my wife again, and anticipating our happy event, the birth of our baby now only a few weeks away. As luck would have it for all of the Gurkhas, we also got back to Church Crookham in time for the Dashain festival.

Our return was followed by some post-operational tour leave, and for me another piece of good news – I had been nominated for the post of Gurkha Liaison Officer Instructor at the Infantry Training Centre in Brecon. The post was regarded as very prestigious – teaching guys who would go on to be section commanders, and some in turn become instructors themselves. My nomination was run past the Gurkha officers of course, and predictably objections were raised; it was claimed by one of them – whom I believed wanted a colleague of his own caste to have the post - that I was not suitable to be an instructor, as I had not completed the Section Commander Battle Course. This was perfectly true, but I felt irrelevant, given my other experience.

One day I got word the OC wanted to see me. I reported to the office, where he thanked me for my efforts in Kosovo during the tour. He then shook my hand and congratulated me on my appointment in Brecon. So I was in. Now it was my turn to thank him, for the opportunity and for his support. He seemed genuinely pleased for me. By contrast one Gurkha

master remarked coldly, 'I didn't know you were going to Brecon'. How dare a Thakuri have the audacity to get on? The instructor's job was an opportunity to make the most of, and I resolved to work hard at becoming an effective teacher, in the process developing better inter-personal and communication skills.

We duly packed our bags at Church Crookham and headed for Wales, my wife now rapidly approaching her due date. At the end of November she gave birth in the Brecon hospital to a beautiful baby girl. With the courses already winding down for the Christmas break I was able to spend time in the new quarters that was now home for the three of us. December was drawing to a close and there were three reasons to celebrate – a new job, a new year and most important of all a new life come into the world.

10. The Art of War

ITC Brecon was a busy, highly charged environment. Every year hundreds of NCOs arrived eager to improve their fighting skills and go on to train and lead their men in war. Here was where they learned how. Courses ranged from the All Arms Live Firing Tactical Training, All Arms NCO Skill at Arms Instructor, Basic Tactics, Dismounted Close Combat Trainer, Platoon Sergeant, Platoon Commander and Section Commander Battle Courses, Medium Machine Gun Section/ Platoon Commander Courses, Snipers Basis/Commander Courses, to SAS Infantry Skills – intended for non-infantry soldiers hoping to apply for selection to Special Forces.

The teaching in drills, tactics, weapons training and other military skills was designed to provide a single high standard and level of expertise for soldiers of all regiments - Gurkhas, Paras, Signals or whoever. This across-the-board excellence aimed to ensure the British Army maintained its reputation for turning out the finest soldiers in the world. Alongside the technical aspects of war fighting, Brecon taught the vital role of communication in the theatre of war; knowing how to extract relevant information from orders received, and how to interpret and implement them in issuing one's own orders along the chain of command. It was a privilege to be an instructor at such a key institution.

In January the first intake for the year reported. There were three intakes a year, comprising NCOs from various infantry regiments and including SAS, each course lasting fifteen

weeks. The structure of the courses was overlapping, so my time would be split between supervising one group on exercises in the field while teaching the next intake with training films, power point demos and practical instruction. For the Gurkhas the theory side of SAA (Skill at Arms) as taught in English was tough, so I began holding extra classes for them in the evenings to keep them up to speed. The pace and attitude throughout was striving, demanding, energetic. Awareness of my SAS background lent me a certain reputation, and for those British NCOs who arrived with the assumption that Gurkhas couldn't speak English, I was able to demonstrate otherwise.

The same was true in the field, where I could dispel the other common perception about Gurkhas' poor marching ability, and in terms of overall fitness. Infantry work by definition was about high physical capability, always being on your feet, and for a leader, possessing at very least the speed and endurance to match that of your boys was fundamental. For the infantry, fitness was the basis of all military skills, and if a leader cannot perform, command is very difficult. Leading from the front – which I was strong enough to do - was what it was all about, inspiring trust, instilling belief and the will to win. Brecon was of course already familiar ground for me, both the terrain and the physical training, which helped when taking the boys on their 'fan dances' around the hills, putting their fitness and leadership to the test.

After six months at Brecon, following good reports from my OC I received promotion from acting to full, substantive colour sergeant, and after eighteen months to the rank of WO 2 (Warrant Officer Class 2). Six months later I was told I would be moving again, this time to teach the Gurkhas at Shorncliffe,

near Folkestone on the south coast of England. One week after my last course at Brecon came another happy event when my wife gave birth to our second child, this time a little boy.

At Shorncliffe I was assigned to the Brigade of Gurkhas Training Team (BGTT) teaching infantry skills to clerks, chefs and other ancillary personnel serving in the battalion. Though these men were not active soldiers as such, they would none the less often be on or near the front line with their colleagues, and so in the event of being attacked needed as far as possible the same war fighting skills. I would also be teaching on JLC and pre-Brecon courses, preparing NCOs for the full infantry leadership courses. Although the ancillary personnel had all gone through the same basic training as every other recruit, many had fallen behind in terms of fitness and military skills in the intervening years, which was a challenge for all of us, as well as amusing sometimes.

It was now almost three years since I had been serving away from the Gurkha battalion itself. During this time there had obviously been some changes, and arriving at Shorncliffe I realised there were several new faces, including the CO and other company commanders. These in turn did not know me, and though my past reports were good, there was a sense of having to start again from scratch to establish myself. The Shorncliffe training job lasted eighteen months, after which time the battalion made its periodic move to Brunei. For our growing family there would be two months leave to Nepal, after which we would fly straight out to Brunei to rejoin the battalion there.

I had now served almost eighteen years in the British Army. According to Gurkha TACOS if I did not attain promotion beyond the rank of WO 2 within the next two years, retirement was mandatory. Still feeling like a newcomer in the battalion

after my time away, I did not feel optimistic about making sufficient an impression to carry me far enough. The prospect of retirement was very unsettling. Missing the career boat now would be a huge blow, in terms of honouring my father's memory, and to the future prospects for my immediate and extended family.

On arrival in Brunei the new CO called me into his office for an interview. He said exactly what I had been expecting to hear: that he would be assessing my performance over the next year or so, and in due course make his recommendations. My fear as always was that these decisions would not be taken in isolation, but alongside 'advice' from certain quarters. One of my numberees, who happened to be related to one of our Gurkha masters, had already received a commission that could not easily be explained other than through nepotism. I could take pride at being among the twenty percent of the Brigade who achieved WO 2 rank, but I knew I was capable of more.

Back in Brunei I became CSM (Company Sergeant Major) for a support company, and in addition was offered the job of PMC (President of the Mess Committee). It was this latter role that inadvertently was to lead to an interesting turn of events. Another new CO had now taken over, and as PMC it was protocol for me to sit at his side in the mess on the evening of his 'dining in', a tradition to welcome him to the battalion. As the meal got underway, the CO engaged me in conversation, outlining his views and ambitions for the battalion. In particular he seemed very keen to widen the scope of the Gurkhas, by encouraging them to attend courses and selections to gain further experience, including the SAS. He then asked if I would be willing to apply for SAS selection. When I informed him

that I had in fact already successfully done so, and served with them, the CO looked understandably awkward for a second. 'Oh,' he replied, 'You're that Johnny.'

The incident was to stand me in good stead however. I had been back in Brunei for a couple of months when the battalion was deployed on an operational tour of Bosnia in a peace keeping role, and at the same time tasked to provide a specialised unit known as an Enhanced Brigade Reconnaissance Company (EBRC). The EBRC's purpose was to conduct covert static surveillance work in Bosnia, and investigate illegal activity, including the tracking down of war criminals. On deployment the EBRC operatives would locate and station themselves in a variety of suitable OPs.

To prepare for this operation, a Close Observation Training & Advisory Team (COTAT) was flown into Brunei from the UK to provide briefing. Leading the COTAT was a Warrant Officer from Hereford. At this point, it came as no surprise when early the following morning the CO accompanied by the Hereford WO paid me a visit in my office. They tasked me there and then to select and establish the EBRC team for Bosnia. It was a huge challenge; the British Army had performed this kind of work in Northern Ireland, but never before with the Gurkhas, and so employing us was very much a leap of faith on the part of the CO. I already knew his vision to expand the Gurkhas' role outside the battalion. I also realised that the credibility of that vision would hinge on the success or failure of the upcoming operation. The next few months would put both the CO and myself, not to mention the reputation of all the Gurkhas, well and truly to the test.

As Sergeant Major, PMC and now the new EBRC leader, the next few weeks kept me busy, 'running around like a blue ***** fly' nearer the truth. The Sergeant Major's role involved

overseeing the day-to-day discipline, welfare and general administration of the company, including training and guard duties. With over eighty men, there were usually one or two with a problem on any given day, often of a family nature such as a sick wife or child requiring their presence at home. Every absence or request had to be listened to, logged, and explained to those above, which all took time. Indiscipline, drunkenness and AWOL misdemeanours were rarely an issue among the Gurkhas, whereas some regiments' ranks could often be depleted on Monday mornings after an enjoyable weekend on the town.

My duties as PMC were to ensure the smooth running of the WO and Sergeants' mess, from budgeting and accounts to organising VIP functions for visiting generals and other high-ranking staff. President of the Mess Committee was regarded as a prestigious post, normally held for six months, but in my case, due to the timing of our deployment it was to run for a year.

Traditionally, most officers' messes in the British Army housed generic model figures of one of their soldiers in the uniform and regalia of their regiment, displayed proudly for all to see. Having observed these fine statuettes in other messes, in my capacity as PMC I proposed that as a matter of pride the Gurkhas should have them too, and likewise adopt the tradition of each member of the mess taking one home as a memento on retirement. My colleagues' opinion on this was divided, the older Gurkhas seeing no reason to change, the younger ones approving the idea. After a period of debate the argument swung in favour, an artist was commissioned, and the first figure of a Gurkha in full battledress complete with Khukuri was installed in our mess.

For the EBRC for Bosnia, there was only a short time to organise before departure for pre-deployment training in the UK. In terms of numbers I was looking for something between a platoon and a company, a team of around forty plus men. The first requirement was that they should be tough and highly motivated, and though at this stage I was not familiar with all the current boys, a couple of weeks proved long enough to judge their physical prowess. As Sergeant Major, I was able to draw most of the team from my support company, plus a few outsiders including specialists from Signals and sufficient drivers. The team I picked would be pre-trained first in Brunei under COTAT guidance then coached intensely in the UK using surveillance techniques developed by the British Army in Northern Ireland. It was known that when forming up these kinds of specialist teams, the British instructors dropped unsuitable candidates during the UK stage. If that happened in our case, bringing in new boys would take valuable time, potentially giving the war criminals and other wanted men in Bosnia longer to ply their trade, or escape justice altogether. Wanting as few of my boys as possible to be rejected, I made my choices accordingly, resisting pressure from the Gurkha masters, who as soon as they knew what was in the pipeline, began trying to push their caste brethren forward.

Certain extra-military skills were going to be required, not all of them familiar to Gurkhas, including driving and photography, which would all be covered by the COTAT instructors in the UK but again, to succeed at that stage, some advance preparation was essential. Photography began with the basic art of composing a good picture, and for practise we visited football stadiums and other public places, taking discreet, long distance shots of the crowd. My role in the

field was to be one of four controllers, each co-ordinating the operations of a series of four-man surveillance teams, and for this the controllers would attend their own specialised course.

There were a number of changes to the plan as the deployment time drew nearer, including a decision for the EBRC to travel to the UK one month earlier than the rest of the battalion. Normally a sergeant major would remain with his company during an arms plot move, but this time I would be accompanying the EBRC in order to prepare them with further support training before the final six-week COTAT surveillance course. There was much to do in the days leading up to our move, not least for the married men, sorting out family affairs and children's schooling.

For the battalion arms plot move an advance party boarded a huge chartered Cathay Pacific Airlines plane. On arrival in the UK we headed to Shornecliffe, where, after a short period of leave, the preparatory training began. Everyone seemed very excited, particularly our new platoon commander, just returned from a Reconnaissance Platoon Commander Course, who arrived and introduced himself on the first day. With a year or two's experience under his belt, he was not 'green'. Though we had not previously met, I had encountered other clever young British officers before, and knew that their enthusiasm, while at first sight inspiring, could sometimes outweigh sound judgement in the theatre. I therefore took care in my briefing, and in our subsequent conversations, to highlight the potential risks we would be facing in the field, and how best to deal with them. In warfare I had learned that bravery and professionalism were not the same as a reckless 'gung-ho' response to situations, and that the latter were best avoided by pre-emptive discussion.

A few weeks later it was time for the most crucial phase before deployment, the COTAT course itself. For some reason, courses in the British Army always seemed to begin on a Sunday. Perhaps this was to pre-empt any weekend hangover excuses, or that since there was no double time payment for Sundays as with civilians, our employers felt they may as well kick off early. The COTAT course was no exception, and on a bright Sunday morning we duly reported. I had given my boys a 'heads-up' of what to expect over the next few weeks, but as no other Gurkhas, apart from myself at Hereford, had ever been involved in this area of work before, there was still uncertainty, as well as some anxiety about what might be in store for them.

Sunday was taken up with admin and settling into the accommodation, and on Monday morning, after a short brief from the COTAT OC and chief instructor, we were put through our paces with some intensive rounds of fitness testing. This stage was not too much of a problem; the candidates I had pre-selected were the cream as far as physical aptitude was concerned, though I made sure to be on hand with encouragement and support, doing the circuits along with everyone else and urging them on.

Normally a sergeant major would not be around his men so much, but with what would follow over the coming weeks, support for the team was vital. The kind of surveillance tactics taught by the British COTAT instructors were completely new to the young riflemen, whose grasp of English was not advanced. Seeing some of them struggling to understand the lessons and what was required of them, I was glad to be on the spot and able to jump in when necessary to interpret the instructor's words in the boys' own language.

The technical aspects of camera work in static surveillance were covered in great detail, including the use of long telephoto lenses. To obtain clarity, infrared would not be used, but rather slow shutter speed, which required a certain amount of skill and practice. The practice took place using both urban and rural locations. In the UK it was high summer. By the time we were fully deployed in Bosnia, we would be sitting or standing for hours on end in unheated buildings with the windows blown out, or on a snowy mountainside in the middle of winter, which was important to bear in mind.

COTAT had been expecting, as per their norm, to fall out around thirty percent of the candidates in our EBRC team. By the end of the six weeks however, they were able to pass every single man on both the fitness and tactical assessments; we would all be going. This both surprised and pleased the instructors, and the team and myself were praised for our efforts. Given my background and the active part I played during the course, I was never treated as a student, and there were no questions over my professionalism. The whole team received an excellent course report, plus recommendations that after the tour a few of our NCOs should teach, a number of riflemen specifically recommended to instruct in photography skills.

The first part of the task set me by my CO, to set up an EBRC team, had been accomplished, and there was now an even stronger sense that this could be a big step forward for all of us. With this mounting excitement came the fear of failing at the last and most important stage of the game; could we the Gurkhas actually pull this off for real, and operate for the first time ever as an effective surveillance force in the theatre of war?

Bosnia remained very fragile. There was reportedly a high level of illegal activity, large-scale drug dealing and the smuggling and trading of stolen cars, as well as people trafficking and pimping, channelled through the country by gangs from Eastern Europe. Our job was to covertly monitor and collect evidence of these activities, identifying individual suspects and pinpoint their precise location so they could be picked up. Initial guidance on who and what to look for on the ground, was to be provided by intelligence agencies. In addition to the gangsters and other unsavoury elements opportunistically profiting from the general chaos in Bosnia, our wanted list contained numerous war criminals still at large, among them HVT (High Value Targets) including the notorious Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic.

After a short pre-tour leave, in the autumn of 2003 I said goodbye to my wife and children, and with the rest of the EBRC boarded the flight to Banja Luka in Bosnia, and on arrival reported to the headquarters of the MNB NW (Multi-National Brigade North-West). The rest of the battalion would be deploying at different locations in an overt peacekeeping capacity, whilst we would be working direct to Brigade HQ, led by a Canadian officer and an intelligence team comprised of Canadians and Dutch. Once we had received a full theatre brief we relieved the outgoing platoon to take over ongoing surveillance operations. The outgoing platoon had worked over the summer; for us, the cold and ice of winter was coming.

Our EBRC comprised a Platoon Commander, 2 IC (myself, working as a controller) further controllers, dedicated Signallers, CQMS (Company Quarter Master Sergeant) and his assistants, and a series of 4-man team ground operatives. These teams comprised in turn a Patrol Commander, his 2 IC, Signaller and a Photo-Tech specialist. Once a team was inserted in their

designated OP (Observation Post) surveillance of the target was to be round the clock, with a rest and watch rota, including the rear. If we were discovered, the targets under surveillance would not hesitate to react with force.

Our geographical area of responsibility was the MNB NW, including a triangle of key towns: Bihac, Banja Luka and Titov Drvar. The demographics of the area were complex, being home to Bosnian Muslims, Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats, people harbouring varying fears, concerns or agendas. We were to find and deploy in a series of covert observation posts, each having a salient view of a known or suspected site of criminal activity. Once the intelligence on our targets was received we could begin searching out suitable OPs. To help us, some of the boys who were now photo-tech specialists were flown over the area in helicopters, taking pictures of potential locations – disused buildings, houses, barns, wooded hilltops etc- which we could then study and discuss the feasibility of back at HQ. This was partly to speed up the process and also to reduce the chance of our presence being compromised; with regular air and traffic movements in the area, a helicopter overhead would arouse less suspicion among the criminal elements than a group of uniformed Gurkhas sniffing around disused buildings. To maintain cover, an OP might be some distance from the target, hence the long-range camera equipment.

The logistics of entering an OP were not straightforward. It was imperative not to be seen, and some creative thinking was called for, biding one's time and waiting, usually for nightfall before taking up a position. Another factor was the weather; with winter on the way it made sense to move in before the snow, which would make road access difficult and leave tracks - then again, if it fell at the right time snow could assist, covering our footprints once we were in. A constant concern

was landmines, which, though some clearing had been done, still littered the terrain. On one occasion, tasked to observe a particular building from the top of a mountain, as we made our way up on foot, we spotted a box attached to the side of tree. Fearing a booby trap with a hidden tripwire, we halted and called up for a dog. The dog, trained to sniff out explosives, padded around the tree, but did not seem to get excited about anything. The box turned out to be some sort of agricultural harvesting contraption. We duly proceeded up the mountain, observed the target building then guided our overt platoon in to make a search.

The work we were doing was classified as top secret, and conducted in liaison with the PJHQ (Permanent Joint Headquarters) in the country. A lot of the time the evidence of crimes we gathered was sent back to intelligence agencies to add to their store of information. On other occasions, where the target was hot, we provided live reporting to arrange for a pick-up to be carried out on the spot. The static aspect of the job was a challenge to the boys' endurance, with temperatures that winter falling as low as minus 30 degrees centigrade. Lighting a fire to keep warm was tempting but unfortunately not an option in a covert situation.

As the cold winter months of the tour wore on, both the Canadian ex-Seal commander at Div. HQ, and more importantly my own CO, seemed very pleased with the way the EBRC was performing. The Canadian, admiring our endurance, likened us to the 'Van Doos' of his home country. The nickname derived from the French number vingt-deux, the Royal 22e Infantry Regiment, the best known of worldwide francophone troops, and biggest in the Canadian armed forces. This positive endorsement of what was a very new line of work for us meant a lot to the boys, and would surely enhance the wider reputation

of the Gurkhas. The CO's gamble or leap of faith had paid off, and having hand-picked every man on the team, our success was of course gratifying on a personal level too.

With my thirty-sixth birthday approaching the future was coming up to meet me very fast, and the big question remained unanswered: would I or would I not receive the crucial promotion beyond colour sergeant? If the answer was yes, I could look forward to a career in the British Army that would take me on for at least another six years. There was at present no shortage of conflicts in the world, with Iraq and Afghanistan now kicking off. My ultimate wish was to take part, alongside my British comrades, in a real battle.

11. Serving to Lead

2004 arrived, and in Bosnia there was plenty coming in from INT to keep the EBRC busy. During the quieter periods of the operation though, those of us temporarily away from the front line took part in a Commander's Trophy tournament, organised among the various troops serving in Bosnia. The events included indoor rowing, trailer pulling and stretcher races. The EBRC boys formed up a team with some of the Canadians and Dutch, and thus we were competing against our own battalion. It was all good sporting fun, and our side managed to squeeze the trophy, though I think my CO was torn by the result, perhaps preferring it if his EBRC had won for the battalion, rather than themselves.

With the New Year underway I was concerned to know one way or another, what the army intended to do with me. If it had been decided I was to leave, I would prefer to learn sooner rather than later, so I could make some sort of plans. In mid-February the CO called me into his office. Anxiously I studied his face, trying to second-guess what he was going to say. He told me that I had been selected for promotion, a commission to the rank of Lieutenant, Queens Gurkha Officer. He reached out and shook my hand, congratulating me on my efforts and wishing me every success. I was elated and thanked him. The promotion was not official yet, but unless I did something drastically wrong in the interim, it was more or less in the bag that in few months time I would be a Lieutenant QGO. Now I could look forward to at least another six years in the British

Army, and of course a pay rise, and maybe further opportunities along the way. I lost no time calling home to tell my wife, who was equally delighted by the good news.

The end of the tour was now in sight, and over the six months we had been in Bosnia, our EBRC teams had staked out dozens of sites of illegal activity, taken hundreds of photographs, and supplied the international authorities with huge amounts of images and information on known or suspected criminal elements. The results were sometimes immediate, guiding troops in on the ground to lift suspects. More often we did not know the end story, our reports adding to the growing store of data on war criminals of all types being collated by intelligence and law enforcement agencies.

A few weeks before our intended departure home, an order was received from the UK National Intelligence Centre (UK NIC), Sarajevo and directed by the PJHQ. Classified top secret and not disclosed to any nations, the order was to seek out and apprehend a certain individual, believed to be at large in Bosnia. The PJHQ duly sent for me, whereupon the EBRC was tasked set up an immediate operation. Advice that intelligence operatives would also be involved, suggested this was no ordinary crime lord: in fact the target was Radovan Karadiz. The UK National Intelligence Centre had received reports that Karadiz was in the southern tip of the country, the area bordering Macedonia. By now spring had arrived and the snow had gone, and while this weather was better for long periods of static surveillance, the warmer climate of the south provided a different terrain. Our searches now took us over hilly, rural country with few buildings, the more Mediterranean landscape of sparse foliage affording little cover. Where we did find a wood or some disused dwellings for a team to set up, the challenge was finding a drop-off point for the boys that wasn't

too close, yet would allow them to insert unobserved in the open countryside. To be less conspicuous it was decided we would ditch our military transport and were permitted to requisition civilian vehicles. Night movement was essential, travelling long distances in the dark, finding our way where necessary without lights. We received periodic intelligence on Karadiz's movements, and made our way accordingly, setting up OPs, surveying farms, outbuildings and road junctions, and photographing and signalling everything back to HQ.

Word was our target had altered his appearance, and the photo ID we carried might bear little resemblance, particularly at a distance. He was also believed injured and likely to be limping. Then one day we got a tip off he had sought refuge with a religious order, housed within the walls of an ancient monastery. Arriving within sight of the location we found it to be a secluded place, nestled amid surrounding hills, a beautiful spot - and an ideal hideout for a man on the run. We carried out two weeks of surveillance on the target, presented our real-time film footage and evidence to the UK NIC, and returned to Banja Luka. A follow-up operation was apparently carried out. No details were provided, and we did not need to know, but we believe the EBRC had played a vital part. The description we had been given of Karadiz matched almost exactly how he was finally found several years later.

The six-month tour over, after enjoying a hearty leaving dinner with the Canadians and Dutch, we bid farewell to our new friends and comrades, and packed for the return journey to the UK. The Canadian officer expressed again his hope that the Gurkhas and the Van Doos might some day work together, while our Brigadier presented us with 'Commander's Commendations' for the huge achievement in surveillance operations. It was felt a splendid job had been done all round,

the Gurkhas representing the British Army well, and leaving Bosnia a more stable place than they had found it. Several war criminals identified by the EBRC were already in custody, and more were to follow. Our CO of course was equally pleased and proud his investment and belief in the Gurkhas' potential had been justified.

Back at Shorncliffe, following a short period of post-operational leave, routine battalion life resumed. The company, when replenished with new blood was to become a very strong force of two hundred boys. In March that year I moved to take over the platoon I had left as Colour Sergeant in '99. For the first three months I was a Warrant Officer, and in June received the promised promotion to Lt. QGO. My life as an officer had begun. Perhaps I could even read the Daily Telegraph now without being ribbed.

Promotion at this stage of my career necessitated attending a Late Entry Officers' Course, (LEOC) at Sandhurst. Though not the first time I had visited this revered establishment in leafy Surrey, whose reputation for excellence set the bar for military training throughout the world, it was a thrill to go as a prospective graduate. The Sandhurst motto 'Serve to Lead' emphasised the responsibility that came with being an officer, while the course reminded us that such responsibilities were shared across the armed services. Lectures and films of past conflicts, particularly relating to Iraq, demonstrated how land, sea and air elements worked to support one another in the theatre of war. The underlying message was that in the midst of danger one was not left alone on the battlefield, and that military strengths combined to become greater than the sum of their separate parts. Of the thirty on the course I was the only Gurkha fighting soldier. After lectures the young officer recruits fresh from university would dine and mingle with the

Late Entry candidates, eager to hear first hand accounts of actual warfare, especially those soon to join the same unit as yourself.

Returning from Sandhurst I began giving some thought to how I should best use this new opportunity. Every army commander, at whatever level has hopes and expectations of himself and his men, some kind of vision of what he can achieve. Like many before me no doubt, I had a dream to make my platoon special. The first thing I focused on was the JLC. In an average year, of the boys attending the Junior Leadership Cadre, only fifty percent ever got through. My ambition was that each and every one of my boys who entered for the JLC should pass. To achieve this goal I knew I would have to work hard, and work my NCOs harder. The effort paid off, and that year all who were entered passed their JLC. The NCOs became much more switched on, and were getting good course results, some with instructors' recommendations.

For some Gurkhas though, however able, however hardworking, they remained restrained by the veiled though not invisible hand of caste. One guy who had done well in the JLC, and would have been an ideal candidate for promotion, found himself inexplicably blocked. When a Gurkha master was asked for the reason, it was alleged that the candidate had 'done something wrong in the mess.' No details were given, and the CO on the promotion board did not apparently contradict the decision. The guy seemed genuinely unaware of any incident in the mess or elsewhere that might have compromised him. Such matters usually remained confidential, but in this instance the candidate's OC could not stay silent. He knew what was going on and was furious about it. Privately I told the candidate that the board's decision was no reflection on his capability; it was unfair but he should not give up. After further attempts,

eventually the man's aptitude was acknowledged and he was granted the promotion he rightly deserved, but it had not been without a struggle.

Soon after my return to the UK, the battalion had been tasked by the British Army to be a VHR (Very High Readiness) unit. These units were expected to be on alert to deploy at short notice anywhere in the world. During September and October though there was the opportunity for the battalion to travel again, this time on an operational training visit to Canada. I enjoyed the role of First Platoon Commander here, as well as the opportunity to see this beautiful country, and guiding my boys, who found the exercises tough - 'the hardest in my life' as some commented. It was extremely cold at night, and wading across icy rivers in the darkened wilderness certainly not pleasant, though personally I felt I had experienced worse.

The following year brought another CO to the battalion, and the announcement of a further peacekeeping tour of Bosnia, scheduled for the coming winter. The battalion was tasked to form an EBRC team as before, and in addition provide a company's worth of surveillance teams for deployment in neighbouring Kosovo. Several of the original EBRC boys were also tasked to pre-train the new members for the COTAT course. I was pleased to see our successful track record in this specialised work was now established, and proud to have played my part in setting up the first Gurkha EBRC team. It was the kind of legacy for the platoon that could be built on in the future.

In the summer, along with our new CO, we were flown out to Kenya for training. The CO, an experienced British Gurkha officer, though not having commanded a battalion comprised of Western Nepalese before, was a striking figure, aristocratic in bearing with an authoritative manner. This could be inspiring,

but also made some of the younger officers run away from him. As for the young riflemen, he did not talk to them. My role in the forthcoming deployment was to be an overt one, and given the possibility that the Bosnian situation could flare up again at any time, the British Army was determined its troops should be prepared. The Kenyan terrain was hot and dry, parched earth and thorny bushes, and balanced training was vital to prevent heat exhaustion, which, within a few days had taken down a number of men in other platoons. I made sure my boys avoided the problem, taking advantage of adequate rest and shade, and regulating their fluid intake to survive on less in the heat of the day.

For the first few days the Company Commander allowed the platoons to carry out their own pre-training before combined operations at company level. The fight here was with the environment – the heat, the harsh barren landscape. Access by road was difficult, which in the event of a medical emergency meant calling up a helicopter for casualty extraction. For several days at a time the military heli would be unavailable, and since scorpions and venomous snakes were not uncommon in the area and we carried no antidote, we could not venture too far. To keep to the training schedule, a civilian helicopter would be rented.

Another hazard was stampeding elephants; sometimes the helicopter would fly over and clear the area of these and other animals. Likewise the local Masai tribesmen and goatherds, who tended to stand and stare too close for their own safety. The sight of the heli encouraged them to follow their livestock to a secure distance, allowing us to do some live firing. Kenya was in my view one of the best training grounds the British Army could have chosen, preparing us for such worst case scenarios as snipers and full scale riots. Though forbidding

to a working soldier on the ground, Kenya's scenery was some of the most stunning I had seen, especially from the air, sweeping low in the helicopter, or coming in on a Tristar. The latter however did not show up for our flight home, and instead we found ourselves aboard a Kenya Airlines plane, travelling all the way back to the UK in business class. There was also free champagne, an unexpected and unaccustomed luxury for ordinary soldiers like us.

The battalion was now ready for another tour of Bosnia, and although, having been there only two winters ago the level of enthusiasm was not so high, we did not want to lose the reputation we had gained, and were determined to do at least as good a job. As well as preparing for my own role in theatre I was responsible for deployment of the whole company, ensuring that their kit, equipment, weapons and documentation were all in order before leaving.

We arrived in Bosnia in late autumn, the air turning chillier with snow on the horizon. The internal situation had shifted now; this time we were not with NATO but the European Force (EUFOR)), the international presence reducing as the Bosnian government took over gradual responsibility. For our part this meant continued intelligence gathering, particularly watching and listening for signs of any elements intent on taking the country back to its former state of chaos and conflict. Increasing throughout the country was illegal logging, hacking down trees and stealing them to sell on. We were tasked to stop all vehicles carrying lumber and check the drivers had bona fide documentation for their load. The role was second-stage law enforcement, stepping in when the local police required back up, as well as ensuring they did their jobs properly. Some were not averse to bribes from the loggers, and had to be watched carefully.

A few weeks into the deployment, my company was tasked to provide security at Sarajevo airport where the NATO HQ was based, followed by a month of rotational duties. Then I was called by my CO and summoned back to Banja Luka, where the battalion and the EBRC were working with the MNB NW HQ. Initially I wasn't sure why I had been sent for. It transpired the EBRC commander had unexpectedly departed and I was to take over. Though having previously led an EBRC team, I had no official training to work in such an integral role in an HQ, a job normally reserved for a Sandhurst graduate. I was also apprehensive on hearing rumours the previous incumbent had left due to a difference of opinion. The CO's faith in me was obviously undimmed however, and I did not wish to disappoint, so it was a case of 'in at the deep end.' Our INT colleague this time was a Romanian, and with the language barrier, communication between us could be tricky, though we got on well. Having several of the boys I had selected and brought over on the previous tour now in this EBRC team was a great help.

From day one I was planning the tasks coming out of the PJHQ, to whom highly confidential information on criminals would be relayed. The job included hosting groups of VIP visitors from the UK, including on one occasion three brigadiers, on another a two-star general. With the Bosnian theatre now drawing down, the powers-that–be were concerned to see the British Army's money and resources being used productively, and talking to these visitors, I would explain the work, and the progress that had been made. The six months reprised our earlier tour, with equally good results. The EBRC earned praise from the Europeans, its achievements including the pinpointing of a particularly high profile criminal and directing other agencies in to apprehend him.

In the early spring we returned to the UK, where this time, as a recce platoon commander, I had the chance to run my own leadership cadre. The CO had managed to send a number of Gurkha boys from the successful EBRC team off for selection, and in some cases promotion. I was now in a position to bring in promising young riflemen to take their place. In the summer the battalion's next arms plot move, to Brunei, was announced. But while the bulk of my colleagues were destined for Brunei again, there were other plans in store for me. The CO, keen to consolidate the good work done in Bosnia, and to continue with his long-term vision to raise the profile of the Gurkhas, wanted me to take over the job of SO3 Tactics. The Operational and Tactical Advisory Group, or OPTAG as it was known, was based at Shorncliffe, so at least my family would not have to be uprooted again for a while.

SO3 Tactics, like the recent Bosnian job, was a post normally filled by a well-educated Sandhurst graduate, certainly never a Gurkha before, so I was in no doubt this would be another big challenge. British Army requirements meant all soldiers attended OPTAG pre-deployment training, in order to furnish them with the most up to the minute briefings on the theatre of war they were about to enter. OPTAG instructors were chosen for their relevant, recent ground experience, enabling them to provide as much detail as possible about what their audience should expect. At this particular time the role of OPTAG was very much in focus, with Bosnia, Iraq, and now Afghanistan, requiring an optimum state of readiness for those deploying.

Those turning up at OPTAG were often surprised to find a Gurkha running the show. My accent was something they weren't used to in an instructor. I spoke as clearly as possible, remembering how at Hereford after a briefing of about seventy-five men, the British training officer had asked me afterwards

if I had understood him. There was no single, standard accent in the army. When one guy at Hereford had asked a question in very broad Ulster tones at machine-gun speed, the training officer stared open-mouthed then asked: 'Can anyone translate that for me?' It had everyone, the Ulsterman included, laughing loudly.

Here at OPTAG, while some students seemed reluctant to make allowances for my speech and even pulled faces, most listened patiently to ensure they understood everything, reciprocated and made me feel at ease. This was the second time I had worked alongside British instructors, though unlike Brecon, OPTAG was tri-service, bringing together Army, RAF and Marines. The Marines were very proud of being 'in the Corps' as distinct from the Army. Another memory from Hereford was a Marine insisting he would never want to join the regulars, or Percy Pongos -something to do with BO, wherever Percy goes, the pong goes.

SO3 Tactics OPTAG was a significant opportunity. I grasped it with both hands. It did mean however that I would be separated from my battalion for the next two years, and knowing this there had been one thought uppermost in my mind: Afghanistan.

12. Afghanistan – Operation Pulk Wahel

During the 19th century the Northwest and Northeast Frontiers of India became the setting for many tales of heroism and adventure, notably in the books and essays of Rudyard Kipling. These were based on real life events – stories of espionage and betrayal, double agents, bloody battles, courage, endurance and sacrifice on all sides. In the international power struggle known as the Great Game, Britain and Imperial Russia fought, often covertly, for control of the harsh, frequently hostile territory, which before the existence of Pakistan bordered directly onto British India. The fear among the British was that if the armies of the Tsar were to dominate the buffer state of Afghanistan, then the Jewel in the Crown of the Empire, India would be next on the Russian Bear's list.

Several Gurkha battalions, including that to which I now belonged, 2nd Gurkha Rifles, the Sirmoors, had fought for the British at that time in the Punjab Frontier Force, alongside a number of Sikhs and some Pathans, the Force earning a reputation for its military prowess. Among the numerous engagements in which the Gurkhas distinguished themselves was the war with the Lushai (1871-2). Five regiments, including the 2nd advanced in twin columns on an enemy palisade surrounded by sharp bamboo sticks. Drawing close, they found themselves facing intense firepower, together with thick, choking smoke from the burning of a nearby village, which cut off communication between the two columns of men. Major Macintyre of the 2nd taking the initiative, decided to use

this situation to his advantage, and leading a group of Gurkhas under cover of the smoke scaled the palisade wall. The sight of these apparently fearless men suddenly in their midst broke the enemy's morale, and the tide of the battle quickly turned. For gallantry in instigating this action Major Macintyre of the 2nd Gurkhas was awarded the Victoria Cross, and the Frontier campaigns became a proud part of Gurkha history, in which our forefathers' role is still celebrated.

In 21st century Afghanistan, the Great Game was still being played out. Those returning from Herrick 4, the most recent operation, had some interesting observations. Over a hundred years later the enemy wore the same kind of tribal clothing. More concerning, they still fought on foot with fairly basic weapons, yet were often remarkably effective against a technologically superior force.

Reports of the fighting, of how close the enemy was, the near misses, narrow escapes as rockets failed to go off, a man losing a hand and not feeling it until later, the ambushes from different directions - it was all horrifying yes, but as a soldier you wanted a part of it, to go and tangle with the enemy in an active war zone. One thing that kept coming back was the absolute commitment of the men that were coming against you out there, their readiness to die in battle. With no worries about death, who could expect anything other than an absolutely fearless opponent. The prospect of facing such an adversary was, I have to say, undeniably appealing.

Given that kind of opposition, and the political factors involved, progress in Afghanistan was inevitably challenging. No one expected a quick fix, and a serious long- term commitment was needed to support the Afghan people. OPTAG was now training personnel for this theatre, with vital briefings from colleagues recently returned from the front line. One

NCO from 16th Assault, also with experience in Iraq told me: 'Iraq was hot – but Afghanistan's ten time's hotter.' He wasn't talking about the weather.

At the end of the year my CO visited OPTAG, and I had the chance to speak to him. I told him that if my battalion, presently in Brunei, should be deployed to Afghanistan then I very much wanted to go with them. He noted my request and promised he would bear it in mind. Others couldn't understand my active desire to get out there. 'You must be mad to actually volunteer…' To me it wasn't madness. It was now twenty years since I had signed on to become a professional soldier with the British Army, and this was the job I had been trained for. Working in Kosovo and Bosnia I had learned, and I hoped achieved something. But for a true soldier Afghanistan was the real thing. I yearned to see and feel what it was like in a hot zone – to experience kinetic war fighting in all its dangers, on the ground. I thought if in the years to come anyone asked me, 'What was Afghanistan like?' I would hate to have to shrug my shoulders and say 'I never went.' I wanted to have that story to tell.

Talk of deployment had been ongoing for a while, and as the news continued to flow in from Camp Bastion, along with the casualties, the talk became more animated; so far though, no one knew who was going, or when. On one occasion the battalion received an official warning to expect deployment within six months, but when no dates or details followed, the fog descended again.

In early 2007 the fog lifted. It was official: HQ Land confirmed that my battalion 1 RGR had been nominated for Afghanistan as part of Operation Herrick 7. I restated my request to take part, and with my CO's support was charged to return, along with my family to Brunei. In February I rejoined

the battalion, as Recce Platoon Commander, which, providing all went according to plan in the meantime, would lead to my third tour of duty in this capacity. Preparations were already in full swing for Herrick, and in May we were to begin test exercises, to determine whether or not the battalion was fit for its forthcoming purpose. Although having only six months experience at OPTAG, it had provided some useful knowledge, which I could now pass on. I was determined to do my utmost to help us through the rigorous testing, essential for what lay ahead, about which there was now much excitement.

There was anxiety too of course, particularly among the families. Everyone knew the challenges and dangers of serving in Afghanistan, and breaking the news to our relatives had not been easy. The boys themselves knew their duty and would make ready mentally and physically. There was some upset one night following a briefing from a senior Gurkha figure. Commenting rightly enough that Afghanistan would be a chance to prove ourselves and show that Gurkhas could 'do the business' he then added, 'a few soldiers dying on the battlefield would be good for us.' Reactions to this last remark were contained until after the briefing, when many of the boys expressed anger. As soldiers they accepted the tree of liberty had to be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants, but it was strongly felt there were more appropriate ways of saying such things. The last thing the battalion needed at this stage was unrest or damaged morale, and it was necessary to assure everyone, whether true or not, that the comment was intended to be inspiring.

Knowing this could be my last chance of operational experience at the front line, the test exercise would be 'make or break'. In the weeks running up, for general fitness I took a few days jungle familiarisation, and spent time ensuring that

everyone, from the youngest rifleman up was fully aware of what we would be facing. There was a huge amount of briefings – on terrain, conditions and threats, in particular the insurgents' tactic of choice, previously used against the Russians, the deadly ambushes. The subject of demographic and political issues on the ground, focused on the tricky, shifting relationship between the Afghan civilians and the Taliban.

Just before the exercises began we learned that our CO was to be replaced, so by the time we deployed it would most likely be with a new leader. Hopefully the change would have no adverse effect. The tests, conducted by the Brigade, were carried out in Brunei in a constructed, Afghan-like environment. The temperature was equivalent to what we could expect, though Brunei was more tropical. 'Excellent!' was the CO's verdict afterwards, followed by: 'We are the Gurkhas, we are bound to do this job well.' This test exercise was of course just the first stage, but when it was confirmed we had passed with flying colours, as Recce Platoon Commander I was exhilarated. It looked like we really were going now.

We flew first to the UK for briefings and two months pre-deployment training. During our outgoing CO's dining out evening, he told me privately that he very much appreciated the work I had done, but confided that his replacement – the 2 IC in fact - was not so keen on recce, and that I would have to fight hard for my place. This was disappointing news coming at such a time. The two COs had their handover ceremony during our training, which was spread across the UK – Lydd, Salisbury, Senne Bridge, Otterburn then Lydd and Otterbourne again. It was non-stop, with live firing and simulating all elements of the theatre, including Apache helicopters, fighter jets and artillery. Alongside the Gurkhas were Marines, Scots and various support units. Otterburn culminated in a March and

Shoot competition, which being at Brigade level I felt a strong desire to win. With careful planning and training I managed to secure first place in the competition - 'Percy Pongo' leaving the Marines behind. It was my third win of a Brigade level March and Shoot – the first as Private, then Platoon Sergeant, now as a Commander.

My outgoing CO's comment regarding the 2 IC's attitude to recce platoon had not been misplaced. The 2 IC made it plain that in his book recce had no unique status, ordering that henceforward our platoon would alternate between recce and FSG (Fire Support Group). The boys had reservations about this change of tack. Traditional wisdom held that recce acted as 'the eyes and ears of the battalion' and it was unusual for them not to be dedicated solely to that role. On the other hand the British Army stressed flexibility, and at the end of the day the 2 IC was responsible for manning. I nevertheless felt that we should be employed where our training and experience was most relevant. The 2 IC did refer to the SAS banteringly as 'a bunch of cowboys' so perhaps we fell under the same heading. Whatever the reasoning, the split was effected, and throughout the UK training period we spent one day on recce leading the battalion from the front, the next moving alongside heavy weaponry such as 50 cal, GPMG SF, Javelin anti-tank weapons and grenade launchers, mounted or carried on vehicles. Already trained to deal with snipers, we now adapted to the other aspects of support work.

By August we had still not been tasked as to our specific deployment. One day we were told Helmand, the next Kabul. At Brigade level there seemed to be a careful, wait and see approach while the situation was monitored. In the final training session at Otterburn it was confirmed: we would be deploying as mobile strike force for RC (Regional Command)

South, based at KAF (Kandahar Air Field) covering the UK, Dutch, United States and Canadian forces area of responsibility throughout southern Afghanistan. From Kandahar therefore it was likely we would be bounced around all sectors, getting plenty of opportunity to show the Gurkhas' prowess.

We returned to Brunei for the final packing and preparation, plus a weekend's leave. With the success of the training, morale was high, but inevitably with a strain of concern among families as D-day drew near. I did not discuss the details of deployment with my wife, though of course she knew it was Afghanistan. As one of the senior ladies now, she too had received a brief from the battalion, not only to address the eventuality of something happening to me, but on her role in supporting the other wives and their children.

Our new CO sent out a nice letter to all subordinate commanders expressing his vision for the forthcoming operation and his confidence in our commitment to a joint effort, referring to the Gurkhas and the British Army as a family, which was comprised of 'Atkins' (the British) and one particular caste of the battalion. No one mentioned the language used by the commanding officer to define the Gurkhas as a whole, but I felt some unease about a certain caste having been singled out.

Finally it was time for those of us in the first phase to deploy. I was ordered to fly first to the UK, reporting to Brize Norton and thence take a chartered flight, accompanying other units to Kandahar. The bulk of the battalion would follow direct from Brunei on two separate flights, with phase three deploying to Garmsir as an attachment to the Household Cavalry, coming a month later. Reaching Kandahar we touched down under cover of darkness, in full protective gear, helmets included, excited by the sense of entering a real operational zone. With all cabin

lights off, reducing the possibility of an attack on the plane from Russian or US SAM launchers believed to be still in Taliban hands, we could see nothing of the surrounding countryside.

Next morning, through the airfield perimeter fence, we looked out on a dry, scrubland terrain, dotted here and there with clusters of flat roofed houses. The landscape was generally flat, broken by occasional small gullies and inclines. We were received by the commanders of the outgoing unit, with a full brief on the operational tour ahead of us, and what we could expect. In addition to these mandatory briefs, since all commanders required as much information as possible from the Afghan theatre, and the best source of such info was from already deployed personnel, there were a series of catch-up briefings. Based on what we learned, we then had to prepare our own package of briefings, ready to deliver to our boys when they arrived, in order to save time and hassle before our first operation.

While this was going on the admin group checked in our kit and equipment. There was a great deal of activity, people running around, and lots of briefings taking place. The aim was to ensure an absolute minimum of confusion, concern and delay once the companies were in, and have them ready to go as soon as possible. The most important aspect of briefings was awareness of enemy tactics, particularly IED and how to identify and deal with them. All troops were within the airfield perimeter fence, but we were warned of periodic attempts to penetrate with indirect fire. At night we heard occasional siren noise, and shots hitting near the fence. Then there were the IED, homemade rockets comprising an old warhead lashed to a stick, the fuse lit from behind a slope or the roof of a house. These crude devices, which actually had a longer range than the conventional RPG, were sometimes successful. There were

dangers nearby too. A few days before we had arrived at KAF our RAF colleagues had tragically lost a senior aircraftman in an IED while carrying out a security patrol around the base.

Our first move outside the airfield was to Camp Bastion, where we were flown for RSOI (Reception, Staging and Onward Integration), the standard initiation requirement for all newly deployed troops, including a live firing package, further IED training and helicopter procedure briefings. Over the next few days, in stages, the rest of the contingent arrived, and as at KAF the scene was bristling with activity, troops, and equipment moving rapidly about. For our FSG, there was additional familiarisation, preparation and servicing of the specialist vehicles and weapons, including 'zeroing' our guns. A problem in the Afghan terrain was sand, which could find its way into the mechanism of a weapon causing it to jam and malfunction. This was easy to avoid with proper cleaning and maintenance.

Preparations were carried out speedily and efficiently, with the outgoing boys busily handing over kit and equipment at Camp Bastion without time for any kind of conversation, except between the commanders. Whilst in Brunei we had received a 'warning order' that we would be deploying in Helmand for our first operation, and given the recent news flow about this area, people were obviously keyed up and concerned to know exactly who would be doing what. From training and anecdotal evidence we had lots of pre-information about the enemy. The 'known unknown' was how one would react psychologically with the enemy face to face. For me, there was a high level of excitement and anticipation. In the hours of waiting I would play the potential scenarios in my mind, the enemy appearing suddenly, perhaps at close range. I was on the alert, primed and ready to 'double-tap' him in an instant.

The advance party and command element I was with had an excellent planning team. Led by the 2 IC they covered every detail with the finest of toothcombs. The objective of our first operation was to clear the green zone outlying FOB Arnhem in the Upper Gereshk Valley. Briefings and rehearsals were carried out at Camp Bastion. FOB Arnhem was located south of Sangin just outside the green zone. Most of the battalion were ferried down on helicopters, while our FSG element travelled with the vehicles in two ground convoys. Any move by road carried the risk of an IED, and sure enough the first convoy was hit, though the impenetrable armour of the Mastiff truck that bore the attack saved its occupants from injury.

1 RGR alongside the Royal Scots and Brigade recce troops (already on the ground with Warrior armoured fighting vehicles) were to take one section of the green zone to clear, while Danish troops covered the other. Here, making our way over several days through a long land basin some 5km wide by 25km long, comprising farmland, straggling villages and settlements, our task was to sweep out any Taliban presence, making the area safe for the local inhabitants. Recce also had WIMIKs, with some of the FSG on vehicles, the remainder of the asset on foot, with us the BG reserve Coy.

When the battle group moved to the forward assembly area, one of our senior Gurkha figures again made a reference to personal sacrifice. 'Don't be a coward on the ground,' he said, 'because your commander has the right to shoot you in the back.' No one knew quite how to take this remark. The boys were silent and marched out obediently. The looks on their faces though said it all.

From the thorough briefings at Camp Bastion we felt we knew what we were doing as the operation began. At H-Hour, night, 1 RGR started to cross the line of departure, and similarly

the Danish troops entered their AO. One particular spot within striking distance of the FOB was a well-known enemy hideout – a small cluster of empty houses from which the Taliban would mount hit and run raids or long distance fire. To pre-empt this one night, a Warrior tank engaged the location with its heavy machine gun for several hours continuously. The noise was deafening, while expending an estimated year's supply of ordnance - a very heavy-duty version of the Nepalese hill boys banging the big drum to frighten away the monkeys.

Part of the FSG continued to watch the flattened hideout, covering the rest of the boys from behind as they made their way into the valley. The challenge with this kind of counter insurgency work was to quell the enemy whilst protecting civilians.

The Taliban wore no uniforms, and blended easily with the locals, who might side with or leave the fight against us at any time. The switching back and forth could occur in the blink of an eye. In a country of such poverty, seeing foreign soldiers on his land a young man might understandably pick up a weapon and join with the insurgents. If the incentive, pressure or fear was in the other direction, he might equally abandon the gun and return to his community.

That community appeared to be hard working and decent, but Afghanistan was socially backward with little or no rights for the poor or women. I had thought my country Nepal behind the times, and true, in my grandparents', even my parents' generation it was not thought right to educate women. Here though the Taliban wanted no one educated, not in the Western sense, which would undermine a status quo that treated females like donkeys, and where the rich landowners ground down their tenants, appropriating much of their crops and demanding extortionate rents. With only small areas of the country fertile

enough to grow food, and the landlords so powerful, ordinary people had at present little choice. If the price of every bullet fired in anger or resentment here could go instead on education, the country would be transformed, and that alone was something well worth striving for.

Ambush was always a concern. At the edge of the green zone was clear evidence of recent enemy presence, trenches and hideouts. A greater danger lay in innocent looking places, the straggling houses and farms hemmed around with high mud walls, allowing snipers to pop up and disappear at any time. Being early autumn the corn had not yet been harvested, and stood tall in the fields, ideal cover for a fleet footed enemy. Shots would be fired from across the Helmand River, but with little accuracy, and we were receiving few casualties thus far. Moving forward, we would see people running away, and Taliban forces appeared to be ex-filtrating the area as we advanced. Others surrendered their arms and, unless they were hard line fighters, were mostly allowed to rejoin their communities.

At night we camped out or sought accommodation with locals, communicating through interpreters. Occasionally we met people who had spent time in Pakistan where they had learned Hindi, and were able to talk to them directly. We gained a growing knowledge of the Afghan people, including the Afghan National Army, who we were expecting to work alongside us, but had so far not shown up. We learned that the ordinary people largely wanted a quiet life, and were welcoming and friendly to us. However a quiet life meant not offending the Taliban, and there was understandable reluctance to provide information. We were there to protect them, but their concern was that we would not be around forever, whereas the Taliban in their view would be. People would shy away from

talking to us, fearing the insurgents would find out and exact punishment on them for fraternising with the enemy. 'I will be dead if I tell,' was frequently heard.

After a few days as BG reserve we then deployed on the ground with the Rifle Company in FSG role. Casualties were remaining thankfully light, a couple of boys sustaining gunshot wounds to the leg. My closest encounter so far had been in the vicinity of the Helmand River, when a burst of gunfire from across the water sent bullets pinging into the ground nearby. In populated areas, even if the enemy were in sight, we did not return fire for fear of harming civilians. RPG attacks occurred occasionally and we were always mindful of IED underfoot. The latter were concealed, though their tripwires sometimes visible. One time an object suddenly jumped up out of the ground in front of us, landing heavily on the forearm of one of the boys. It turned out to be a large old ordnance shell, refilled with explosive, with a thin wire attached leading off towards a nearby canal. Taliban operatives hidden on the bank must have pulled the wire on our approach, but the device failed to detonate.

After three weeks of sweeping the valley, our job here was for now complete. All troops reconvened at FOB Arnhem where the CO congratulated his men on a successful operation, with equal praise for all units attached. The senior Gurkha then delivered his own speech to us in Nepalese, at which point some of the junior ranks brought up the remarks he had made previously about commanders shooting us in the back. There were some murmurings of disquiet, in which the CO did not intervene, and the Gurkha apologised, saying his comments had not been intended seriously.

It was now time to return by road and helicopter to Camp Bastion. A and C Companies extracted to Kandahar via heli and C130 Hercules, where our next operations were in the pipeline. FSG 1, under my command, with Coy Tac was to be tasked by BG HQ to recover with all vehicles and operational equipment to the logistical support team at Camp Bastion, thence to transport certain items on to Kandahar. For this intended convoy I was appointed security commander to my OC, as well as acting as 2 1C in the latter's absence on compassionate leave in Nepal. Careful preparation for the convoy now ensued, sitting down with my OC Major Alex Roberts to discuss the move. Going overland through Helmand required comprehensive analysis of every aspect of the journey, and detailed contingency plans.

The overnight journey to Camp Bastion was uneventful, and in the morning we dealt with the WMIKs and other vehicles, together with supplies of ammunition, tents, sleeping gear and other essentials. A couple of days were required for reconfiguring the convoy and briefing for the next phase of the journey, including a refresher on IED drills. We would be travelling on Highway 1, the only feasible overland route from Camp Bastion to Kandahar: For Coalition forces it was also the most dangerous stretch of road in Afghanistan. The key hot spots had been well documented during RSOI, areas of Taliban support, particularly east of Gereshk, known as 'IED Alley' and western Kandahar. Well acquainted with maps, photographs and reports on this notorious route, we were now about to get out there and see it for ourselves.

13. The Ultimate Sacrifice

Our three-day halt at Camp Bastion was over. We had rested, had further briefings, and rehearsals and reconfigured the convoy. Major Roberts, myself, the CSM and other junior commanders had put together a thorough plan for the second phase of our journey back to Kandahar. Major Roberts had prepared the orders, in liaison with HQ's intelligence.

The Sergeant Major and myself now set about administering these orders – overseeing refuelling, the mechanical inspection of all vehicles, weapons and ammo checks and replenishment of rations and water. We also briefed the boys on our intended route and the contingency plans for any eventuality, ensuring they were equipped mentally as well as physically for what lay ahead.

The onward journey was to be split into two overnight moves, stopping when we came into daylight hours at FOB Wilson, a Canadian base en route, close to Kandahar. Night travel was not mandatory, but we would now be a convoy thirty-three vehicles long, including ammunition trucks, and carrying ninety-seven personnel down Highway 1. We did not want to signal our presence to the enemy more than was necessary. This meant switching off all vehicle lights and driving with NVG (Night Vision Goggles) worn by all personnel, not only those behind the wheel. We had all received basic training with NVG, but we put in some extra drills to ensure everyone could use the equipment competently. Looking suddenly into the

bright lights of oncoming vehicles while wearing the goggles could cause temporary loss of vision, and it was important to be aware of such hazards.

Among the convoy was an OP BARMA team, to investigate anything suspect on or near the road surface as we progressed. Major Roberts our OC would be keeping in regular contact with Brigade HQ via TACSAT radio, and for added protection, air cover, a limited, precious asset here, would be with us, checking our route ahead for any sign of IED or enemy activity right through until 0500 hrs, by which time we should have reached our stopover. After a final rehearsal of the whole procedure, we were ready to go.

Of the thirty-three vehicles mine was placed fifth from the front, immediately behind the command vehicle, a Vector, brand new in theatre, carrying the OC accompanied by the RMO (Regimental Medical Officer) Medic, Signal IC, FAC (Forward Air Controller) an interpreter and the driver. We set off into the chill October night, initially a single column, but somehow as we left the perimeter gate the logistics vehicles turned one way, the rest of the convoy the other. As it was a ring road, after circling the camp all vehicles linked up again.

The start of our journey had not been ideal, and more problems were ahead. First, one of the Snatch vehicles, its driver unfamiliar perhaps with the road, rolled over. Luckily no one was hurt, but the vehicle had to be returned to camp and the personnel reassigned in the convoy. All then ran smoothly until about halfway to our initial destination, when one of the trucks inexplicably stopped. In the event of a breakdown, procedure was for the vehicle to be towed to avoid delays. When the mechanics investigated however the brakes were found to have completely seized up and the wheels would not turn, so towing

was not an option. After some two hours intensive work, the mechanics finally managed to free the wheels, and we were on our way again.

However the delays now meant our scheduled night move was running into daylight, and crucially beyond 0500, which meant our air cover, having other priorities, had already left us. The Canadian FOB was not far off now however. As first light began breaking, the desert landscape around us stirred into life, occasional farm animals moving as Toyota flatbeds passed, and the 'jingly' trucks loaded with pots and pans, farm produce, cement or livestock. As we approached a village, the locals, until now hunched against the cold, began emerging from their shawls as the sun's rays warmed the air. There was a mood of calm as the day awoke, and for us the welcome prospect of rest at FOB Wilson.

Things were not destined to go as planned however. It was 0800 and we had just reached the edge of the village when it happened. It was the noise that came first, a huge blast shattering my senses, pounding at my eardrums and causing everything around to vibrate and sway. Within the same split second, as the deafening blast reverberated out across the desert, I saw the Vector in front of us lift several feet into the air, turn a full ninety degrees then come crashing down. Amid billowing clouds of dust, huge slabs of broken concrete were flying through the air, some smashing onto the Vector as they descended, others ripping into the tarmac, gouging great holes, sending up showers of earth and gravel on impact.

My driver had slammed on his brakes. In a daze I stared at the scene of devastation that lay in front to us, my mind struggling to take in what had just occurred. Suddenly there was another noise, a burst of incoming fire from the direction of the village. Some of the top-cover gunners, including that

on my own vehicle, who thought we were already under ambush returned fire. We sat tight. After a few seconds the firing stopped. I looked ahead. The Vector looked in a poor state, the wheels and chassis parts crushed and misshapen, its bodywork smashed and partially caved in. In there were seven men – one of them our OC, Major Roberts. Now along with the shock, I felt a sudden, stomach-churning surge of fear. The first, immediate thing to expect following a contact was a voice over the radio, alerting all personnel to the situation: 'Charlie, Charlie One – contact wait out.' That voice should be the OC's and I had not heard it. Neither had there been any further movement from the battered Vector. Finding my voice, I made the announcement over the radio myself.

Now I feared what might happen next. Our command vehicle had sustained a devastating blow, but it could just be the start. The enemy's favoured pattern was a sequence of attacks, an IED the precursor of secondary devices, small arms fire, RPG, or all three. It could kick off at any moment. Fighting the fear I remembered the rule: stop - think - react. With still no sign or sound of the OC, someone had to take charge. In theory, as force protection commander I should lead the convoy out of harm to a secure location, leaving the Sergeant Major – located some way behind – in charge of the broken-down vehicle.

But there was a saying in the army: no plan survives contact with the enemy. Leading the convoy off was not a simple matter - where was a secure location? On one side of us lay soft, open desert, away from the potential danger of the houses, and affording no cover for enemy forces, but perfect for concealing further IED. As for leaving the highway the village side, the road being banked up, dropping down would put our top covers below the level of the high walls that surrounded the houses, behind which gunmen or RPG could be lurking.

The third option, to move directly forward was not only tricky with the disabled Vector blocking the way, but risked running across secondary devices. My current position, and that of the three vehicles ahead was roughly level with an ominous looking alleyway on the right. On my PRR I ordered the three in front to move back slightly, the rest of the convoy to remain stationery, and for the top cover gunners to face south to the houses, while the front and rear were to stop other vehicles in both directions.

The civilian traffic was already leaving Highway 1, a stream of vehicles skirting round us on the desert some distance off. The explosion must have been heard from a kilometre or more away. With everyone rapidly in position, my attention turned to the Vector, which, amid the settling dust, still sat ominously silent. I stepped out onto the dust covered Highway 1, and began walking forward, calling on my PRR as I did so for the Company Sergeant Major. With every step I braced myself to receive a bullet, or the blast of another IED. The tarmac road had completely disappeared, in its place a ragged crater of soft earth, boulders and rubble, in which the command vehicle now sat. Drawing level with the Vector I stopped. I could now see a few metres away, a figure stretched out on the road. It was my OC. From the condition of the body I knew immediately that he had not survived.

I steadied myself. There was nothing more I could do for Major Roberts. Suddenly I heard someone screaming, and saw the driver of the vehicle trying to scramble free. I helped him out, and guided him back towards my own vehicle, tasking my driver to administer first aid. In the same moment the realisation hit me like a thunderbolt: I was now effectively in charge – responsible for the safety of the casualties, and all the remaining men in the convoy.

The priority was to check on the others in the command vehicle; I had an awful feeling in the pit of my stomach. The prospects for the rest of us, stranded in the enemy enclave with no FAC (Forward Air Controller) Signals or MO were not good. As I approached the door of the Vector someone else clambered out. It was one of our local interpreters, who immediately ran headlong in a state of shock towards the front of the convoy. While shouting forward for the crew to grab him, I saw a third man emerge. This was the RMO, who, looking very white faced and semi-conscious, held his arms out as if trying to cover his ears. He staggered a few paces before I could grab hold of him and take him back to my vehicle. 'Doctor Sahib,' I said swiftly, 'are you ok?' He stared for a second then replied, 'Yes, yes, I'm ok –where's my Bal?' He meant the Vector's top gunner, also a medic, who'd been in position prior to the explosion but was now nowhere to be seen.

Others appeared now, among them the Signals and FAC, both badly shaken, but otherwise seemingly ok. The driver had some quite severe cuts to his face. Checking the other side of the wrecked Vector I found the missing top gunner laying on the ground and moaning with pain. He had been thrown several metres. All were brought into cover of the convoy. By now the CSM had arrived on the scene. I briefed him the situation and tasked him to bring other company personnel forward to treat the casualties.

Amid the horror, I felt undeniable relief knowing the vital elements of Signals, FAC and MO were still with us. The MO and FAC rallied remarkably fast, their training kicking in, the MO, despite his own ordeal, doing a tremendous job caring for the other casualties. In this uncertain predicament, expecting an enemy attack any time, there was anxiety among the men. With thirty-two vehicles and ninety odd soldiers, some of

them getting very agitated now, it was a challenge to keep the situation under control. At one point a motorcyclist was seen speeding away from the back of the convoy. Suspecting a 'dicker' – a spy indicating our current situation to the enemy – some of the top covers at the back opened fire. In all probability the man was a civilian trying to hurry past us, and I ordered no shooting unless there was a direct threat. There was considerable distress, not least among the younger boys, some of whom, witnessing the aftermath around the Vector were physically sick as we conducted necessary procedures for the respectful care of Major Roberts' body.

Though much had happened, and it seemed far longer, less than ten minutes had now elapsed since the IED hit. Up until that point the battalion would have had periodic reports from the OC on our progress. Now, with no air cover it could be a while before HQ became concerned about us. A follow-up attack could easily come before then. It was therefore imperative we make contact with the Brigade as soon as possible to summon support and air extraction of our casualties. A quick check of the command vehicle confirmed the TACSAT communications system had been destroyed in the blast. By the time a back up set had been utilised from the rear of the convoy, it was around fifteen minutes from the time of the incident before our '9-Liner' SITREP (Situation Report) was put in to HQ and a helicopter ordered to pick up our wounded. HQ meanwhile tasked FOB Wilson to send a QRF (Quick Reaction Force) to the scene.

With the heli on its way, it was our responsibility to provide a secure landing site. OPTAG had taught us that the Taliban, familiar with the air extraction of casualties, were known to mine likely landing spots, or lay in wait nearby to target the helicopter on arrival. An IED in this scenario did not even

require to be radio or command wire detonated, the down draught of the heli's rotor blades on arrival being sufficient to trigger a device hidden beneath a thin layer of sand. In previous incidents such tactics had claimed more lives than the initial attack, so precautions were vital. After pinpointing a nearby spot on the desert, I tasked our OP BARMA team, located in the third vehicle to clear the immediate vicinity of the explosion, as well as the chosen HLS (Helicopter Landing Site), ensuring there were no further IED planted in these areas. I could now move some of the convoy to a safer distance from the village, and mark and secure the HLS, supported with four WIMIKS.

After the first shock and confusion, everyone worked as a team, following my orders in a professional manner. With the HLS secured, casualties stable, and all round defence of the convoy in place, there was little more we could do but wait and watch. An eerie calm descended. Apart from the line of distant traffic still bypassing us on the horizon, there was little sound or movement from the desert or the village side. This was the period of Ramadan, and our Afghan interpreter who had run off after the explosion, apparently commented that had he died on this day he would have gone directly to heaven. Our one assurance was that we were only eight kilometres or so from FOB Wilson. As the minutes ticked by with no sign of the heli or the Canadians, the anxiety began creeping over me again. The convoy sat patiently, but I knew they would soon want to know what the hell was happening.

0830 passed, then 0845. The sun rose higher, the stream of traffic over the desert building up in what was here the morning rush hour. Still the heli had not come. At 0900 half a dozen vehicles appeared ahead of us on the road. It was the Canadian QRF, together with their EOD (Explosive Ordnance Device) team. We had not expected the latter. They asked what

help we required. I explained what had happened, and that our casualties were awaiting air extraction. I stressed our concerns about a follow-up attack and the vulnerability of our ammo consignment, and that we needed support for the onward journey to FOB Wilson.

Relieved things were happening I put in a call to HQ on the TACSAT, but for some reason could not obtain proper reception. The Signals IC did not know what was wrong. I spoke to the Canadians, only to discover they were experiencing the same problem, and likewise had no idea why. I tried again on the TACSAT, but this time the set had gone completely dead. Concerned the heli might not locate us, I felt very scared again. If we weren't found, and couldn't move far enough away in time, the enemy could launch a full-scale attack and set off the ammo trucks. With no means of summoning air cover or any other kind of support there could be a massacre. We were sitting ducks.

It was just before 0915 when I heard a faint droning. The noise deepened, distinct from the hum of the traffic. I saw a distant speck in the sky. As the shape of the heli came into focus, there were shouts of relief along the convoy. I felt the knot in my stomach loosen. Straining my eyes upwards I watched as the heli came overhead, only to fly off again. The boys' cheers turned to cries of disbelief. We had to somehow attract the heli, and one way was to send up smoke. I held back however, as smoke could just as easily alert the enemy that a helicopter was about to land. We tried the TACSAT again but without success. I decided then we had no choice but to pop up some smoke, and briefed my NCOs. The smoke did the trick, the helicopter returned, and made a safe landing.

After the casualties had been loaded and the heli departed, there was a loud bang, followed swiftly by another. RPG in indirect mode were coming in from somewhere in the village, hitting perilously close to our vehicles. Having established an area of safe ground on the desert I quickly moved the remainder of the convoy away. Now even more anxious to get going, I proposed we deny the damaged command vehicle to the enemy, ensuring they gleaned no knowledge of it, and then get the convoy in transit again. The Canadians however had certain responsibilities to fulfil before they could leave. Their specialist EOD team, who would make safe any other devices within range, would also conduct an on site investigation into the blast. I agreed to provide close protection with WIMIKS while they carried this out.

It didn't take them long to confirm the method used to blow up the Vector: a CWIED (Command Wire Improvised Explosive Device). Parts of the device, concealed in the soft earth at the banked up side of the road were retrieved, along with several metres of thin cable leading along the alleyway opposite, and into the village. Stationed at the far end of this alley the enemy operative would have had a salient view of the convoy as it passed. Prior to this point, and from the same position, he could also have seen diagonally along another alley to watch our approach, allowing him to detonate at the optimum moment. It also seemed likely the command vehicle had been specifically targeted. Either in or en route from Camp Bastion, dickers could have identified the Vector, advising their fellow insurgents via mobile phone. The vehicle, brand new in theatre and with an umbrella-like TACSAT aerial on the roof, was not difficult to spot. The EOD group's investigations completed,

the shattered Vector was put on tow for later examination, and finally, and to my great relief, at approximately 10.00 hrs we began to move out.

At FOB Wilson I was able to get on the phone and put in a verbal report to the battalion 2 IC at Kandahar. I debriefed the boys, telling them to rest and that the plan was to remain in the FOB until the evening then move as per original orders on to Kandahar. The battalion CO had meanwhile nominated a replacement commander for the convoy, another major. He was flown into FOB Wilson that same day, and led us, together with helicopter and aircraft escort on the final leg of our journey. Meeting the convoy at Kandahar were the CO and 2 IC. The CO expressed his regret, and the following day I was expecting him to send for me for a discussion. This didn't happen however. He did ask a couple of times if I was ok, and whether I wanted to see the trauma management team, but there was no debrief other than my written-up, factual report of the incident.

Another person, a senior Gurkha who, among other things was responsible for our welfare, I would also have expected to sit down with me and go over the events, in particular the effects on the boys who had been with me, both for their own well-being and to assess their fitness for future operations. No such conversation took place, though one day passing me in the cookhouse he said, 'Was it you brought about the bad luck?' Banter and gallows humour in the face of painful events is not unusual in the army, as a kind of coping strategy. This did not strike me as an attempt to ease the mood however. Caste issues aside the individual had rarely disguised his dislike of me. In these circumstances though such a remark seemed at the very least inappropriate, for all concerned.

Our next operation was scheduled for two weeks time, though before it could go ahead the army investigation team had to compile its own reports. The mystery of why both our and the Canadians' communication systems had failed at such a critical time had been solved; the use of all these systems and other equipment had in effect cancelled each other out and prevented the radios from working. The army also had to confirm absolutely the cause of the fatality. Once these formalities were concluded, arrangements could be made for the repatriation of Major Roberts.

News of the incident had naturally saddened the battalion back in Brunei. The death of one of their own officers also focused the boys' attention on the realities of the situation out in Afghanistan, especially knowing they too might be sent here any time. Likewise the British and Gurkha families in Brunei and the UK were moved by hearing what happened, and concerned as ever for their own relatives who were serving.

All felt the deepest sympathy for the family of Major Roberts. As a soldier and comrade, I also nursed a sense of outrage. I felt that those who had perpetrated this act had no place on the planet, and the frustration at not being unable to strike back at the enemy that day out on Highway 1 remained intense. This impotence created anger, but anger in itself was of no use. I gave a brief to my boys, and talked about the inevitable sadness, fear, and sense of failure we were experiencing. Out of those feelings, we had to forge an absolute determination to see our job through – to plan better, work harder, and be tougher. Whatever it took to win, for our fallen comrade, we had to pledge ourselves to that aim.

With all due processes complete, it was time to pay our last respects to the OC at the ramp ceremony where he would embark on his journey home to the UK. Assembling at Kandahar Airfield

were troops from all nations, standing solemnly to attention around the CO. The Padre delivered a moving tribute, followed by a blessing. The bearer party now made ready, comprising three British Gurkhas and three Nepalese, whom I had the honour to be among. The atmosphere was highly emotional, and I could feel tears in my eyes as we began the slow, silent march towards the waiting Hercules. Now came the moment of final farewell. It was heartbreaking. As the coffin, draped with the Union flag and Gurkha hat was lifted aboard, the thoughts and prayers of everyone were with this fine young man, and with his family.

I had known Major Lex Roberts from his time in 1 RGR, and later more closely in his position as Intelligence Officer in Bosnia during 2003. Devoted to his family, he was also a highly professional officer, as well as a warm and very friendly person, loyal to the Gurkhas and their ethos. A number of colleagues, including the battalion CO placed glowing tributes on record, testifying to Major Roberts's integrity, courage and professionalism, as well as his compassion and good humour. Prince William, who had been mentored by the Major at Sandhurst, was reported in the press to be 'deeply saddened' at the news. In Afghanistan, as one of his subordinates within the Alpha and Bravo Fire Support Group, I was impressed by his willingness to hear the views of his men, and value their contributions to the continued development of an effective Fire Support concept. I had come to regard him as a much-valued colleague and friend.

There were many more deserving tributes paid by the fellow soldiers of Major Roberts, who was recorded at the time as being the highest-ranking member of the British Army to have given his life in service in Afghanistan.

14. Op Spin Ghar - The White Mountain

The Battle Group Planning Team had received intelligence briefs regarding the situation in a particular stretch of the Oruzgun Province. Oruzgun, located roughly in the middle of Afghanistan's thirty-four provinces, it's centre Tarin Kowt, was demographically similar in terms of tribal culture to Kandahar. After 2004, when the new province of Daykundi, comprising mainly Harazas was marked out in the north, Oruzgun's population comprised mainly Pashtuns.

Oruzgun had already been the scene of a crucial power struggle. In 2001 the Pashtuns of Tarin Kowt – a town of some 10,000 inhabitants and a couple of hundred shops – had rebelled against their Taliban governor. Involved in this uprising was a relatively unknown politician named Hamid Karzai, who, assisted by a group code-named ODA 574 – an A-Team of eleven US Green Berets – was attempting to recruit local men and forge them into a people's army. The Taliban retaliated, while Karzai and his ramshackle band of followers defiantly dug themselves in, determined to hold Tarin Kowt. The Green Berets pitched in, and with American air support and the continued valour of the Afghans, succeeded in sending the Taliban packing. The victory was a significant one, establishing Hamid Karzai's reputation as a leader, and taking control of this strategically important area away from the Taliban.

That was some six years previously and there had been no guarantee the Taliban would not return; hence our deployment now. Our destination was the Baluchi Valley, a long, green

expanse of semi-populated land within the Oruzgun Province, flanked on either side by the steep, barren slopes of the Kuran Ghar Mountains. According to reports the valley was being occupied by growing numbers of Taliban fighters, and military action was required to deter, disarm or otherwise eliminate the enemy presence from the peaceable community.

Baluchi had been nominated 1 RGR Battle Group's AOR and, under the codename 'Spin Ghar' was about to become our second operation in Afghanistan. My platoon's first role in this op was to form up two FSG groups. Group 1, led by myself, was to insert and provide close protection to the Operational Control Team, who would be setting up a hilltop base at the upper end of the Baluchi Valley. The task of FSG Group 2 was to establish an OP at a position high up on one side of the Kuran Ghar Mountains, providing a strategic view of the valley below. We would not be alone; Australian Special Forces had been drafted in to support our insertion and the ongoing key stages of the operation, including location of HLS and securing our line of departure. At the lower end of the valley meanwhile, Dutch troops would begin from their own base, moving up to meet us, and sweeping the intervening terrain free of enemy presence. The Afghan National Army would also be working with us.

Once the various elements were formed up in Kandahar, orders for the operation were confirmed, and things began to move very rapidly. Latest intelligence on enemy strength had prompted a request for more troop support, to which end a VHR company had been flown in from Cyprus to swell our numbers. As ever, preparation was vital, for which the two FSG held their own training sessions, focused on the particular problems each might encounter, our group mainly concerned about attacks on our troops from the north.

FSG 2 was expecting particular difficulties during its insertion. Though all vehicles, ammunition, heavy weaponry and supplies were to be flown in to the Dutch base by Hercules, FSG 2 was tasked to insert directly onto the mountainside. The summit of Kuran Ghar however was formed of a narrow ridge with no landing space even for a helicopter. The plan therefore was for the boys to drop from the Chinook as it hovered above the ridge. On either side of the ridge there was a sheer drop of several hundred metres, and the dangers from any miscalculation in the manoeuvre were obvious. Before deploying, the planning team had to search for an equivalent terrain on which to rehearse this heli insertion. With numerous groups and nationalities taking part in the operation, and some tricky logistical challenges like this, every last detail had to be co-ordinated, briefed, and rehearsed.

Piling into a Chinook we took off for the southern Balucci Valley. In the middle of a large area of flat, open landscape, like pinpricks on the map lay a cluster of huts and single storey prefabs enclosed by a high wall. In the far distance the Kuran Ghar mountain range rose up out of the desert, stretching its peaks high into the Afghan sky. Touching down the Chinook's rotor blades sent up huge quantities of dust, blanketing our uniforms as we disembarked. This was the Dutch base, Camp Holland where the FSG would now regroup and join our Dutch and Australian colleagues already in situ. The Dutch were delighted to see us. A long entrenched Taliban network in the area had made the task of clearing it difficult and hazardous, and they expressed confidence that having the Gurkhas on side as part of the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) would greatly assist.

Inside the compound we unpacked, and put up our tents, our accommodation for the next few days. Alongside the featureless compound wall, a standard local design, built 20 feet high by Afghan women from mud and the once yearly rain, we lashed together some planks to form an observation post. There would now be some waiting around, until the various elements of the operation were ready to mobilise. To stay focused and in shape over the next few days, we constructed some improvised weight training equipment, with heavy ammo cases as barbells. For less strenuous R & R the packs of cards came out, sitting around beneath the shelter of the wall playing 'marriage' or rummy. No one lost their shirt; playing for money, officially at least, was against regulations.

Meanwhile the time of Dashain was almost upon us. Though a festival for all Hindus, Dashain has a particularly prominent place in the Nepalese calendar. Dashain is based around the ancient story of Ram and Sita, in which the demon Ravana has for many years been terrorising the peace-loving people. Ravana steals away the Lord Ram's wife, Sita. Ram, trained from boyhood in the military arts, embarks on a quest, one that will test his character and endurance to the limit. When he finally finds Sita there ensues a fearsome struggle with the armies of Ravana, which lasts several days. On the tenth day, through heroic efforts Lord Ram triumphs and wins back his beloved wife Sita. The demon Ravana is vanquished and the people are liberated.

This legend, with its battle between good and evil seemed, on the eve of our operation to take on a special significance. On the night said to mark Lord Ram's victory we invited our Dutch and Australian colleagues to join us in celebration. Food and soft drinks were shared, Tika, the red coloured rice flavoured with yoghurt was prepared, and a few grains placed ceremoniously

on the foreheads of all the troops present, including the CO. In Nepal it is the custom during this ritual for the younger people to receive Tika from their elders, who in doing so bestow their good wishes for happiness and success on the generations to come.

The Operational Control Team arrived next day, and together we flew out to the Dutch FOB. This FOB was not a permanent structure, instead collapsible mesh cylinders had been brought in and filled with mud and sand, forming a series of large, standing pillars, thick and impenetrable by bullets or RPG. From here we guarded the Dutch HLS, posting men on the nearby slopes, tucked in and well camouflaged in small recesses amid the barren rocks.

From the FOB we flew off again, arriving under a full moon in the upper Baluchi Valley, from where, in a rented house we were to establish an Operational Control Centre for the incoming personnel. We had donned the uniforms of the Afghan National Army for our arrival; we already resembled Afghans and the uniforms were intended to complete the deception.

Operation Spin Ghar was destined to have a memorable start. On day one, as the battalion headed across the valley, the lead element of Australian Special Forces ran into resistance. An intense fire fight ensued, which soon produced casualties on our side. A heli was quickly on the scene to airlift the wounded, while our boys were still coming under fire. All fought gallantly, but it was some time before the enemy were finally put to flight. A member of the Australian SAS team, having received a gunshot wound sadly did not survive. One of the Gurkhas, for his heroic actions in maintaining fire support throughout, was subsequently awarded the Military Cross. Although the Gurkhas and Australians had shared many joint exercises in the past, this was the first time we had fought side by side in theatre

since the Second World War. The Australians were to commend the Gurkhas' performance throughout the operation, and for our part the Aussies' courage and military prowess were never in question. The bond of mutual respect between us had been re-affirmed.

Our foot patrols carried satellite navigation and GPS, but principally found their way around with old-fashioned map and compass. The OP BARMA personnel would go first, armed with metal detectors sweeping the ground for IED, and armed with ECM (Electronic Counter Measures) to jam the signals on any radio-detonated devices.

As the clearance continued, so did the resistance, and with it the casualties. One time, our team in the OP high up on the mountain spotted an enemy group in the process of mounting a serious RPG attack on our boys down in the valley. The OP team, equipped with a tripod mounted Javelin system took aim and fired. The Javelin missile, a smart piece of kit complete with frontal camera and heat seeking capability, travelled approximately 2 kilometres across the valley, landing with deadly accuracy in the midst of the enemy. This pre-emptive strike not only stopped the planned attack in its tracks, but also seemed to have a deterrent effect, damping down resistance to the clearance from that point on. We confiscated or discovered numerous quantities of enemy weapons, as well as IED and booby traps. Negotiation was preferable to retaliation; on stumbling across a small arsenal of new looking missiles in one man's house, we summoned some ANA people to question him about the collection.

A key feature of Taliban strategy in this area was to establish small, hidden ambush posts, usually built in or around natural caves or hollows. These were sometimes extended and fortified with a roof of boulders, shored up with chicken wire and

wooden props. Tucked away inside there might be mounted or hand held weapons, ammunition and supplies. When Coalition forces came within range, the enemy could open fire then leave the weapons in situ and disperse back into the community, with nothing to implicate them in the attack. Russian style doss bags and bedding, along with provisions for an overnight stay or stakeout would be found in the caves. Working our way through an area close to the HLS, we came across a very well organised base, complete with casualty treatment centre and a large cache of arms. From this location, the HLS was an easy target, the set up indicating not casual insurgence, but preparations for warfare. It was a reminder that though our enemies might often be unseen, they were ever present, active, and making plans.

An interesting discovery was made over the airwaves. The enemy were known to communicate via walkie-talkie, which we would monitor with our own devices. As we made our way through the valley, we would often see boys and young men on the move, using their walkie-talkies. Among the messages intercepted when the Gurkhas were about, one went as follows: '...these are not the white soldiers, they are little, like Chinese, they are fast...run away, run away, they will catch you...'

The locals were welcoming, and though fear of the Taliban made them reticent they did not seem suspicious of us, or what we were doing in their country. Afghan people tended to be tall, and here were dressed almost entirely in the traditional style, the men in plain baggy trousers and loose shirts to below their knees. Women were hardly seen other than working in the fields. Most of the houses were enclosed within high walls, and callers only admitted once the women and children had been sent indoors out of sight.

Farming methods were reminiscent of Nepal, only here the Taliban seemed determined they should remain that way, ploughing with bullocks and sowing and harvesting the crops by hand. In the green area of the valley, everything that grew was used, the fruit on the trees for food, its branches as fuel for ovens and fires. Large tracts of land were dense with leafy, 6-foot high marijuana plants, cultivated mostly for local use, perhaps accounting for the carefree, unfocused attitude among some of the Afghan Army and Police Force. Poppies for heroin were grown too, though no one talked about it.

The two companies, after moving pincer-like towards each other over ten days, met up in the middle of the Baluchi Valley, ready to head south by air for the second phase of Operation Spin Ghar. Further planning and briefings took place, while the Aussie Special Forces bid us farewell to deploy on missions elsewhere. I was tasked to regroup my platoon for recce, and to support the battalion in this capacity for the rest of the operation. I was delighted; recce had always felt a natural role for me, the job I did best. Our responsibilities would now include those that the Aussies had handled or shared with us over the past few days – marking and securing HLS, and leading the company to its line of departure from theatre.

My platoon moved initially down the east of the river that divided the valley lengthwise, then crossed to an area known as an enemy stronghold. Over the three or four days we spent here, possibly due to the earlier pre-emptive missile strike in the north, we met with little resistance. Another ten days were required down south, moving up and down the area performing recce and intelligence, and guiding the companies down. Simultaneously the Dutch contingent was working its way up towards us.

The total of guns and armaments decommissioned from the Balucci Valley at the end of three weeks suggested the work carried out there had been extremely successful. The Gurkhas had consolidated their reputation with the Aussies, while the Dutch had expressed admiration of our willingness and ability to move around so swiftly on foot in such a theatre. The overall positive outcome reflected well on all nationalities and units involved. The troops on the ground had relied on the superb planning of the Gurkha commanders, notably our 2 IC, and the other assets, land and air, had done an equally fine job of putting together a highly complex operation.

Another was soon to follow. Codename Breshna, location: Chenartu. Some 200 km north of Kandahar, in the mountainous Chenartu Valley, clinging to the thin, winding lifeline of the riverbed lay a fragile pocket of fertile terrain, a rare green zone inhabited by a small and isolated community of farmers and their families. The remoteness of this valley had turned it into a Taliban stronghold for training and recruitment. This enemy was not to be underestimated; several US forces had recently been heavily ambushed in the area. These American forces operated in small groups, and if air assets were unavailable, there would have been little hope if surrounded and outnumbered. Our mission was to reclaim Chenartu for its people, and it was going to require a large force and careful planning.

The first question was how to get there. The valley was notoriously difficult to penetrate in winter and even in relatively favourable weather the mountainous terrain, ideal for ambush and IED, posed an extreme challenge. With a combined air and land insertion agreed on, our Battle Group Planning HQ set to work, supported by information from US Intelligence. The ORBAT (Order of Battle) was to comprise two companies from 1 RGR, one inserting by helicopter and one on the ground,

together with Canadian long range support guns, US forces and ANA personnel. I would be leading FSG 1, taking the battalion mortar platoon in overland to set up advance cover against resistance already on the ground, and forming a bulwark against further enemy incursion.

We would only have the benefit of a passably good road surface for part of the journey - the main Kandahar to Tarin Kowt road, bypassing the large Arghandab Dam. To reach Chenartu meant leaving this highway at a certain point and striking overland to set up the southern firebase. The second company, going overland and supported by FSG 2 would leave the main road further north, the Canadian long range guns setting up nearby while the men made their way into the valley on foot. This would be no easy insertion; the terrain was steep, uneven and treacherous. Once in, FSG 2 were to set up an HLS, enabling further troops to be dropped. As the clearance troops moved southwards, FSG 2 and FSG 1, positioned at the north and south ends of the valley respectively would provide ongoing fire support to their colleagues working in between. On conclusion of the operation, FSG 1 was to locate, mark and secure an HLS in the south for safe extraction of all troops, before making their own withdrawal overland. As the planning and preparation gathered pace, the daily news flow from US Intelligence gave increasing cause for concern, with UAV footage showing significant enemy movement round our intended route of insertion

Rolling out from Kandahar Airfield under a piercing blue morning sky, the convoy made an impressive sight. Over a hundred vehicles long, which would swell to almost two hundred when the Canadian guns joined us en route from their FOB, this was a massive show of force. Passing through Kandahar city on our way out, there was an eerie calm as the locals turned to gaze apprehensively at us, then went back to their business. Unlike

Bosnia and Kosovo, here there was no mood of welcome, only a quiet watchfulness on both sides. The briefings, and recent events, were on all our minds.

By around 4 p.m. that afternoon the convoy were at the planned split up point. While we left the road with the US forces and ANA to move east overland and set up our firebase, the Canadian guns, first RGR 1 Company and FSG 2 continued on. It was now a case of negotiating our vehicles up and down over arid, lumpy terrain until reaching the green zone. Dropping down a steep ravine we heard loud gunfire suggesting some huge assault had begun. In fact it was sporadic shots, vastly amplified by the acoustics of the valley. Seeing the mountainside now rising sharply up behind us, with our vehicles sitting ducks below, I ordered all guns to face the rear as we continued on. Further on came more gunfire, injuring an ANA soldier in the leg, while shots continued to ping off our vehicles. To extract our casualty we had to stop and await a heli. With darkness now closing in and the rocky inclines unsafe for night driving, we set up careful all round defence. Hearing the intercepted chatter on the US guys' listening devices we were in no doubt the enemy were watching, and talking about us.

The morning brought a third contact, fortunately ineffective. Around midday we found a suitable looking firebase, and proceeded to space out men and guns in defensive positions. The battle group to the north were by now in position, and the clearance operation could begin. Here and there weapons and IED making equipment were found, while the sheer size of our force seemed to be deterring the enemy from open engagement. It was evident some IED had been recently set for us, which the EOD team were able to blow. The contacts we received were met with huge volleys of return fire unleashed from the convoy. No one felt in too much danger, the incoming shots being random.

There were further injuries, but so far no fatalities. Our boys were pleased to hear the US forces, no slouches themselves, referring to the Gurkhas as 'strong and versatile.'

In five days the business was done, the valley clear. With troops assembled to our FSG 1 location it was now time for us to bring the heli in and get everyone out. After that we would drive back the way we came. Finding a good HLS was no easy task, and constant monitoring of what was going on around us, as well as communication back and forth with HQ on the security situation was imperative. Ordering up the heli HQ were cautious, repeatedly asking for my reassurance that the site was secure: they had heard chatter, seen more movement on the UAV. Was I sure, they kept asking, was I sure? I was as sure as I could be. That night we marked the HLS according to standard procedure and waited. It was dark, cloudy and there was no moon. The heli appeared and began to descend, but coming lower it pitched forward at an angle, the front colliding heavily with the ground. The craft quickly righted itself then hovered for a moment, before rising up and departing again. It transpired it had snapped part of its undercarriage, and was unable to lift the troops.

The extraction would now have to be carried out in the morning, and in daylight. Everyone was very aware that the greatest prize for the enemy was to destroy a helicopter, preferably with several troops inside, thus all take offs and landings had to be performed with the utmost speed, efficiency and all round defence, all ears and eyes straining to remain alert amid the deafening noise and huge dust clouds of the downdraught. One helicopter had already been hit by gunfire during this operation.

In the event the heli returned and took off again without incident. Relieved after the successful extraction of the troops, my boys and I were left to make our way back. The return

journey, retracing our way to the main road, was not one of choice, simply the only route negotiable by vehicle. Though the objective of the operation had been completed, we remained on high alert. Having tracked us on the way in the enemy had probably not been idle in the interim. Given our size and the continuing air asset available to us, a fight would be no problem; the concern was unseen IED. This eventuality, quietly but constantly dreaded did not occur however. We returned to KAF tired, unharmed and relieved.

Back at HQ my platoon seemed to take new heart by what had been achieved both in the Balucci Valley and Chenartu. We were fighting back, and winning. With morale on the mend, I was looking forward to some imminent leave, and thereafter a continued strengthening of the boys' resolve. If we could consolidate now, see out our mission in Afghanistan on an upswing, doing the business and getting results, the platoon would have fulfilled an important duty, not least to Major Roberts.

Things weren't to be so straightforward however. Afghanistan was a campaign being fought on more than one front - if indeed there was a front in this kind of asymmetrical warfare. Problems could flare up anywhere, dynamics change or become sticky. Just prior my leave-taking, the CO had a word with me concerning a situation that had arisen some distance away down in the south of the country, the farthest outpost of the Coalition in fact between us and the Pakistan border. The place was Garmsir, site of a large and bloody battle some years ago. One of our Gurkha companies was presently encamped there, in a remote location called FOB Delhi. According to the CO my presence was required, and I would be going alone.

15. Serving with Prince Harry

In the third week of December, half the battalion were set for a few days leave over Christmas while the other half would take New Year. I was in the first half. The Tristar took off smoothly for Oman, and I sat back comfortably, looking forward to seeing my wife and children. At Oman we were transferred to a Jordanian Airlines chartered flight for the onward leg to Brunei. Again the take-off was fine, but then in mid-air came a massive, shuddering bang. Pulses raced, heads turned this way and that - it sounded as if we had come under attack. The pilot announced it was a mechanical fault, and we would be touching down in India. We spent six hours on the tarmac at Calcutta. Airborne again, there was another surprise in store – an unscheduled stop at Bangkok. We finally arrived in Brunei half a day late.

After the short but very happy time with my family, I returned to Afghanistan. Down south, Garmsir and its as yet unknown challenges were waiting. First I had to attend to what I was leaving behind – the platoon, and the man who would be taking my place. A two-week familiarisation package introduced the incoming commander to the platoon, gave him some background to the work we had been doing, and a few pointers on what to beware of. For myself, parting from the close-knit team who had worked so strongly together since the start of the tour was an undeniable wrench, and I was touched to see the boys felt the same. My replacement was a young British officer, and it was understandable the boys felt unsettled by this change of leadership after three and a half months in

Afghanistan together, given the experiences we had shared in that time. However the CO decided on the manning and it was a case of what must be, must be. I reasoned to my boys that this young officer needed the experience, and the fortnight handover period would make the transition as smooth as possible for both them and him. Also I was leaving them with an excellent recce colour sergeant, who I knew would do a good job. Nevertheless I still felt a reluctance to go. I knew where it was coming from. At the heart of it was the fact I didn't want to leave my current AOR; the events on Highway 1 resonated in all our memories, and with them, a burning sense of unfinished business.

The long drive down to Garmsir was awful. There were no roads, only open desert, and bouncing in and out of craters for several hours in the back of one of two Mastiff trucks, left not only me, but the poor visiting CO accompanying us shaken and hobbling by the end of the journey. On arrival at FOB Delhi I was made welcome, and given a full brief from my new OC for the tour and the Gurkha 2 IC officer. The FOB would now be my home for the next three months.

I was already familiar with the recent history of operations in Garmsir, and it was a sobering one, our previous company here having lost several men in fierce fighting to clear the area. The struggle to maintain control had continued, with further losses. Massive amounts of ammunition had been expended in the process, estimates of a million or more rounds loosed off. A number of civilians had on various occasions been hit. Books had been written about it.

It was now early January and everything was very quiet, with enemy activity negligible. I was advised this was merely a lull, and that there were two reasons for it; lack of foliage on the trees and bushes to provide cover for the enemy, and the temperature though hot in the daytime, could plummet to minus

zero at night. This particular winter was turning unusually cold, with rain and light snow making the ground slippery and hard to walk across. The Taliban fighters, not possessing much in the way of warm clothing, were it seemed biding their time.

The cessation of hostilities was an opportunity to get the lie of the land, and gather reports from those who had been here on the ground over the past few months. On the west side of the Helmand River, the company occupied JTAC Hill, a fort on an earth mound put up by the British in the 19th century. On the opposite side of the river was the FOB itself, and at a little distance east, by the canal stood the Balaclava checkpoint. It struck me the situation was difficult and rather depressing, both for the company and the local inhabitants, or at least the people that had once lived here. For Garmsir was an ideal location for a town, being close to logistical assets, chiefly the main north/south road, the River Helmand and a separate canal, and not long ago there had been a vibrant community here, centred round a bustling marketplace.

With the establishment of FOB Delhi, the local inhabitants had fled, a few staying to the north and west of the river, the remainder settling in a village four or five kilometres south. This village was regarded as neutral, and being easily visible any enemy presence there could be monitored, in particular dickers spying on our movements and passing information on. This left the Coalition occupying the southern and eastern fringes of the abandoned farms and houses, much of which had now deteriorated into a no-man's land.

In what was a green zone in the warmer seasons, a stretch of terrain beyond no-man's land, Taliban fighters would creep forward under cover of rubble and trees to a safe distance and fire at the FOB before running away. Helmand River, spanned by a nearby bridge was in relatively easy view. On the opposite

side of the FOB ran the curving wall of the canal. The canal afforded much better cover for the enemy, who would venture very close to the perimeter to attack. A warren of ditches and tunnels, some of them the original agricultural irrigation channels, were also used as cover to advance, place and launch IED and indirect fire of one kind or another. Some of these conduits extended to within two hundred metres of the FOB perimeter walls.

As winter turned to spring and the days in Garmsir grew warmer, I quickly understood what the boys here had been talking about. After a few days first hand experience of being fired upon, the effects of the enemy having achieved such easy proximity were evident. There were frequent near misses when bullets whistled past our heads, and the enemy would even come right up to the mud wall around the FOB, poke a hole and fire blindly through, then run. On one occasion an NCO was woken by the sound of what was thought to be a Chinese made rocket dropping on the roof above his head, only escaping as the device failed to explode.

Even if clumsy and inaccurate, these kinds of attack were enough to keep our troops pinned down. One day a round of bullets came within centimetres of me. It was this that really woke me up to the fact something was fundamentally wrong. A FOB was designed to provide security, and this wasn't happening in FOB Delhi. And if the armed troops here felt unsafe, it was hardly reassuring to the local community.

The sporadic attacks also seemed intended to draw our fire. A few stray shots from out of nowhere would be answered with massive artillery volleys, mostly from FOB Dwyer, a base situated some ten kilometres west of FOB Delhi. These huge retaliations filled the air with noise and the countryside around with spent cartridges – this was where the talk of a

million rounds came from, the number by this time probably no exaggeration. The repeated artillery action had steadily reduced the houses to rubble, the ground to a series of mounds and holes, and from the air Garmsir now resembled a moon-like surface, pockmarked with craters. This random destruction of the Afghans' homes and farms, together with fear of Taliban IED in the vacuum thus created, were unlikely to encourage any former inhabitants of Garmsir to return. With virtually no contact between the Coalition and the people, any notion of winning hearts and minds seemed impossible.

This once thriving area had tended to become a hub for drug dealing and gunrunning, and the Taliban now wanted it for this purpose again, hence their ongoing tug of war with the Coalition Forces. In September 2007 the 2nd Battalion Mercian Regiment had made a valiant attempt to oust the Taliban and reclaim the land. Venturing out after dark, they had come under fire and soon there were shouts of 'man down'. The enemy had come in at close range and, estimated to be around a hundred strong, were attempting to encircle the force. A GPMG was set up in defence, sending tracer out between the rounds to try to pinpoint targets. As the firing and noise of rifles and RPG intensified all around them the Mercian lads, greatly outnumbered braved hail after hail of bullets to rescue their seriously wounded comrades. Pinned down, they contacted the FAC to call up an air strike. Given the enemy's proximity, to be effective the plane had to drop its payload at perilously close range, and in the deafening blast a wall providing cover collapsed, immobilising another man. By the morning three young men of the courageous and close-knit 2nd Mercian had given their lives in the action.

When the present company had first arrived in Garmsir, being aware of their predecessor's experience and the fatalities sustained, they would naturally have been cautious. What was

surprising though was that nothing had moved on. The danger remained, in and around the FOB, and at the same time there had been no progress, only stalemate.

Given the operational tempo was not as it should be, could anything be done about it? Typical of Afghanistan the conflict was with a covert enemy, one that would not show its face. Compared to operations elsewhere in the country however, this was a uniquely static scenario, in some ways like the trench warfare of WW1, a standoff between two sides dug in, with the Coalition forces understandably reluctant to venture out into no-man's land. Rumours that the Taliban knew white faces meant officers and hence prize targets would place an additional curb on movement. From my perspective none of our soldiers - officers or other ranks, British or Gurkha – should be trapped like this.

My views were not readily accepted by all. When a Mastiff was hit by an IED one day, it was maintained this was a legacy bomb, downplaying what I believed was a high current level of enemy activity around the FOB. There was one mystery however; given how long these attacks had been going on, why had they so far been so random and haphazard – surely such a local enemy would have studied every inch of our defences by now, and be hitting us more effectively? Even as I was pondering this however, some of the incidents of incoming fire began to suggest the accuracy was in fact improving. One theory put forward by the boys on the ground, was that these were not usually locals attacking but insurgents coming in from further south, possibly Pakistan, to test their mettle. If this were true I would have to find some hard evidence that would convince the OC and Brigade HQ to take action.

I continued to study the layout of the FOB, the surrounding terrain, and collate all the incidents that had, and were still occurring. I also made use of a high-tech resource, a Nimrod spy plane. Studying the wide range of images gathered by the Nimrod's camera confirmed what some of the boys had said. Further south, towards the Pakistan border, individuals could be observed collecting weapons from local Taliban, and tracked making their way up to Garmsir, there entering the trenches and irrigation channels that led right up to FOB Delhi to make their strike.

These fighters were possibly fresh out of Pakistan, and using Garmsir to commit their first act of warfare and gain confidence before skirting the no-man's land and then heading further north, probably to Sangin. Not all of them made it. One day, after spotting movement via the Nimrod, enemy forces were monitored assembling along the walls of the canal. We waited until shots were fired, then opened up with our guns from the FOB. When this failed to suppress the incoming fire a fighter aircraft with a 1,000 pound bomb was called up, which solved the problem that day, killing a number of the enemy, and leaving another large crater behind. We quelled several such attacks by this means, sometimes killing thirty at one time. That might normally be thought a deterrent. This though was not normal warfare, and still they came, to shoot their rifles at us, each new recruit perhaps unaware of their predecessors' fate, and the sophistication of the weaponry they might encounter.

There were two related hurdles to overcome; first to stop the attacks on the FOB, and secondly cut off the route north, thereby staunching the flow of new enemy recruits to Sangin and elsewhere. Both could be surmounted in my view only one way; by a proactive initiative, deploying patrols out across no-man's land and the green zone, clearing the IED and enemy

presence, and by cautious and steady degrees taking the whole area under control. There were a number of high mud mounds similar to the JTAC site, built by the British in the Great Game days, potentially ideal salient positions. Occupying these points would offer commanding views over the surrounding terrain, and enable us to dominate and neutralise any enemy presence. Ground troops mobilising outside the FOB were likely to invite strong resistance, so some degree of air cover was also on the list of requirements. I began putting together a written plan, discussing the key points with the OC. His comments suggested that he agreed with the assessment of the situation, though he seemed non-committal on whether or not to implement the recommendations. Before anything could happen the plan also required the approval of our Brigade HQ back in Lashkar Gah.

Meanwhile, in the line of duty, I was granted what for me was a unique experience. We had been informed there was a visitor to theatre, very high up the VIP list indeed and already in Garmsir. Better known to the outside world as HRH Prince Harry, the young officer from the Blues and Royals, attached to the Household Cavalry was currently working with our company there as Forward Air Controller. Protocol for the Nepalese Gurkhas was that we should address him as Sahib, just like any other British officer, and, his presence in Afghanistan being highly classified, his identity was not to be discussed or disclosed to outsiders, including our Afghan interpreter. As part of the recce operations around the FOB, I was to work directly alongside the Prince.

I had often heard stories of the Prince visiting my old regiment the 2nd Gurkhas. During training on Salisbury Plain, Prince Charles had brought his two young boys William and Harry, Harry then aged five or six, I imagine, down to Imber village. Dressed in soldiers' uniforms, they were introduced to

the Gurkhas and presented with souvenir khukuris. When older, and considering military service Prince Harry's first choice had apparently been to join the Gurkhas, though, doubtless for good reason he had been placed with the Blues and Royals. Now he had been allowed to serve in Afghanistan, it seemed his wish had been granted.

At a tender age the Prince had suffered, with his brother and family, the tragic loss of his mother Princess Diana. Witnessing her funeral on television, with the young princes accompanying the coffin, while Elton John's moving tribute Goodbye England's Rose was played was also a poignant experience for the many people whom Diana had helped and spoken up for. Thousands that had never met her felt an emotional connection, that her courage and compassion, and what she stood for were unique. Growing up must have been extremely challenging for both her boys, and Prince Harry in his teens did not always receive the best publicity, often portrayed by the media as frivolous and irresponsible. No one observing this young man now, on active service in a war zone, would regard him as anything less than an intelligent, courteous and highly competent officer, the consummate professional.

In the Prince's capacity as Forward Air Controller, and mine as Operational Officer we exchanged information regarding enemy activity, and where necessary he would arrange air cover or strikes. His attitude was focused, switched on, an utterly dedicated fighting soldier. At the same time he was friendly and down to earth, without any princely or other airs. Not everyone could ignore the fact we had a royal personage in our midst though, and there was one person alleged to have tried to take advantage of it. A custom among Gurkhas on active service was to source, slaughter and cook their own food from what was locally available. One day in the FOB, we were looking

forward to a meal of goat, and the meat was to be the absolute freshest. As we gathered around for the animal's throat to be ritually slit, one soldier, seeing Prince Harry looking on, held up his camera and took a picture of him. We prepared and cooked the goat and sat down to our meal, which Prince Harry enjoyed with us.

No one else thought about the photograph until some days later, when a package was intercepted on its way to the office of a national newspaper in London. Inside was a roll of film. Which newspaper, and how much was offered for the picture of Prince Harry attending the slaughter of a goat – presumably with some provocative, bloodthirsty headline - we never found out, and the soldier concerned was removed from theatre.

It was to be two months before the plan for FOB Delhi was finalised, and an official response to it received. Brigade HQ and the OC broadly agreed with the recommendations, and that the company should deploy outwards from the FOB, neutralise enemy activity and take control of the surrounding territory to a distance of up to one kilometre. A date was fixed for the deployment, in which our company of Gurkhas was to be supported by the Afghan Border Police. The police, regarded by the US military as a key ingredient in the ultimate aims of the Afghan security mission, were being closely mentored by US forces hoping to eventually push them down as far as the Pakistan border. This would be a demanding strategy, requiring resourcefulness and vigilance, both with regard to the enemy, and any Afghan in the police ranks who might be either a Taliban sympathiser or a loose cannon affected by smoking marijuana. One Afghan policeman apparently under the influence managed to shoot himself in the leg.

The Americans were positive and determined, and their support for our forthcoming operation was warmly welcomed. The elements coming on board had now been put together: the US Navy's EOD team, to sweep the ground every step of the way for explosive devices, armour-plated Mastiff vehicles to transport the troops, air asset at the ready - the helicopter pilot advised throughout by JTAC on the shifting scenario of enemy presence and safe flying heights. Royal Military Police would be going along to take care of any prisoners, and a contingent of Engineers would construct the new defensive positions using Hesco Bastions - the super scale version of the sandbag, the Hescos were the collapsible wire meshes that could be filled in situ with sand and rocks to create thick, bullet and blast proof walls.

I had earmarked three locations for our forces to take under control. The first and probably easiest to reach was on the opposite bank of the river Helmand, on the right hand side of the road just past the bridge. Clearly visible from FOB Delhi, it would provide us with an ideal checkpoint for the road, and an all round view across the vicinity. Second was a high hill to the south, also on the other side of the Helmand, from which our troops could fend off attacks coming directly from the south, as well as across the river to the east - thereby covering the green zone. The third location was at the opposite side of the FOB on the other side of the canal. The establishment of a checkpoint here would provide visibility along the canal walls, cutting off attacks from enemy forces that at present would creep along unseen.

After a full rehearsal, D-Day had arrived. Members of the company with back-up troops began making their way slowly out of FOB Delhi and into no-man's land. I remained within the FOB, directing and monitoring all movements. As soon as the

first personnel had left the perimeter of the base, the incoming fire started. Though the company was intent on travelling no more than a kilometre, the level of resistance meant movement had to be gradual and methodical, dealing with the enemy as and when they attacked. This operation would be a slow, but hopefully sure one.

Over the next few days the EOD team dealt with numerous IED, and from the intricate labyrinth of trenches, collected several caches of arms and ammunition. When each of our three key objectives had been reached and cleared, and the defences put in place, there was an opportunity to survey from a new perspective the littered stones and earth that had once been walls, terraces and homes. Looking down at this ghost town, there was now the hope that the place would be rebuilt, and the men and women who had lived in the houses and farms return to a quiet, harmonious life in which their children could play safely and happily. The operation had taken two weeks and cost us two casualties though neither of them serious. The territory gained was not large, but the change could be enormous. If the local people could now see someone was looking out for them in their own backyard, and that the repeated strafing of their land with bullets had ended, it might inspire confidence in a new and peaceful normality.

In this asymmetrical war local sympathies swung, through fear or opportunism, between the Taliban and the Coalition. A recurring concern was the Afghan Army and Police, who, working alongside us could occasionally turn hostile without warning. There were destined to be a number of incidents of ANA personnel opening fire on Coalition troops, at least one resulting in a claim of negligence against the British Army. These local rogue elements were either simply disorientated by marijuana or turned out to be supporters of the Taliban. In the

case of the former, maybe a simple plant was another enemy that should be dealt with. Poppy production made fortunes for Afghan landowners and warlords, who would readily kill for control of the trade. If the lucrative demand for drugs in the richer countries did not exist, maybe the Afghans could be left to concentrate on growing food.

Ironically FOB Delhi was formerly the site of a thriving agricultural college. With the Afghans reassured of continued protection and support from the world community, these institutions could be reopened and teach people how to get the best from their land, feed their communities, and provide employment and opportunities for all sections of society. The military campaign to bring about such positive change was an on-going one, and for the sake of the Afghan people who desired to be free from tyranny – for example the courageous young girls who simply wanted the basic human right to go to school without fear – it could not be abandoned. The struggle for Garmsir, to make it a proper community and not let it fall prey once more to drug dealing and gun running, was important.

Prince Harry had not been involved in our recent operation, having by this time rejoined the Household Cavalry in another part of the country. Later, watching Sky News via the recently installed BFBS satellite in FOB Delhi one evening, our Afghan interpreter clapped his hands to his head in amazement; the face of the young FAC officer he had until recently been rubbing shoulders with every day was blazoned across the screen, as the story of his recent tour of Afghanistan was released. The interpreter could not believe his misfortune in not recognising the Prince at the time, and taking the opportunity to shake his hand.

16. Thanks to the British People

The battalion returned from the war zone in a blaze of glory. It was no exaggeration to say the CO was over the moon. Back in Brunei the success of the tour was celebrated in up-beat military style, with a parade and flypast from Bell helicopters. The triumphant mood was not without recognition of the heroes who had made it possible; those who had returned injured, or not come back at all. For many of us, our abiding memory would be the shining example of leadership set by our OC Major Roberts.

At the medal ceremony, presided over by General Sir David Richards, there were presentations among others to our Regimental Medical Officer, for his extraordinary efforts on Highway 1, helping other injured colleagues immediately after bearing the full brunt of the IED blast himself, and for his subsequent unfailing commitment throughout the tour. One of my junior NCOs was a keen sportsman. During an operation with the Canadians in Kandahar, his vehicle had been struck by an IED, resulting in him losing a leg. Such was his courage and resolve he went on to become a world-class volleyball player, competing in the London 2012 Paralympics. The same spirit and determination to honour the sacrifices made by our service men and women shone out in the Brigade of Gurkhas, as it did throughout the British Army.

The seven months of operations had certainly been varied. Historically, apart from one battalion in the Falklands campaign, Afghanistan had provided the Gurkhas with their first experience

of kinetic war fighting since Malaya in the 1960s, other deployments since World War Two being largely security and peacekeeping duties. Winning the trust and admiration of the British and Coalition partners, including Afghans, Americans, Australians, Canadians and Dutch, the Gurkhas could surely count the Afghanistan campaign a success. Fighting side by side with these other nationalities the boys' level of professionalism on the battlefield had impressed them, and there was a huge amount of praise heaped on us. The Canadians, in recognition of the Gurkhas' support had presented us with a plaque of honour. How Afghanistan evolved remained to be seen, and with talk of a withdrawal already on the horizon the military men and women on the ground could only trust their efforts would be reflected in the political sphere, and that some kind of positive outcome would be achieved for all the Afghan people.

Throughout the Afghanistan tour, I had never been entirely sure what I would be doing when it was over. In the British Army, officers commissioned under the late entry scheme could stay on to at least the age of fifty. This mandatory entitlement did not apply to late entry Gurkhas however, who were only guaranteed a further six years service from the date of their commission. This meant I had another two years, after which there could be some further promotion that would extend my career. The final farewell to the army, when it did come, would mean packing up and returning with my family to Nepal. After twenty-two years moving round the world it would be a big change for all of us. Other members of our families were in Nepal, and there would be friendship and support; the real challenges would be practical ones, chiefly how to earn a living. If a further promotion came through it would give me more time to save and prepare for 'retirement'.

One job I had been seeking for a long time was that of Battalion Training Officer. I had been turned down for it previously on the advice of a senior Gurkha. The hope was my British superior would now support me if I reapplied for the post. He was a man of great leadership ability on the battlefield, and I was keen to ensure he was aware of my own capabilities. Believing genuinely that the recent operational report on me was not an accurate reflection of all I had done, and that my future could hinge on it, I asked for the report to be reviewed. My request was granted, but the original content of the report upheld. Oh well, at least I had tried.

In any walk of life people's opinions and reactions to events can sometimes be puzzling, and the army is no exception. After the inquest into Major Roberts's death, one senior British figure remarked to me coldly that he had recently made a similar trip along Highway 1, and that 'nothing had happened' to him. Mentioning this to someone later, it was suggested that perhaps I had misconstrued the remark, and it had been a reference to an improvement in security along the highway. But the tone had not suggested that. I wondered now, since I had not been offered a personal debrief after the incident, whether any questionable assumptions had been made about my actions on the day. More likely the person concerned was simply venting their distress onto the nearest available target, a human enough response.

I reapplied for Battalion Training Officer, and this time decided to speak to the CO direct. It seemed to do the trick, as shortly after returning from post-operational leave in Brunei I was delighted to learn I had been offered the two-year post. There was now the opportunity to pass on knowledge and skills gained over twenty-two years of military experience to a new generation of servicemen. I was keen to do well in the

job, and teach the boys not only the practical skills, but instil where possible a sense of ambition and a desire to fulfil their potential in the British Army. As the various intakes began work I could feel a new sense of confidence was already taking hold. Among those on the Platoon Sergeant Battle Courses, Section Commander Battle Courses and other programmes, there was a level of energy and commitment not seen in previous years. These attitudes translated into real success when the results came in, with record numbers passing and achieving distinctions.

A Battalion Training Officer's duties included administration – recording progress and results, providing feedback on the courses and candidates etc - as well as ordering essential supplies such as ammunition. There were also inter-company knowledge and skills based competitions to organise. For the shooting tournament a special award for the winning team had recently been instituted. In honour of our former OC Major Alex Roberts there was now a unique silver cup bearing his name. The 'Roberts Cup' would henceforth be awarded by the battalion each year in perpetuity.

As a young rifleman I had always nurtured an ambition to take part in the Bisley shooting competition in the UK, and perhaps even win something. Now I was to get the chance, with an additional appointment to Battalion Shooting Officer. Selecting a talented team, we trained hard, and in 2009 the team were proud to bring home the Bisley Trophy for us.

An opportunity to train another company involved a trip to New Zealand, I had been to North Island before, and found it breathtakingly beautiful. This time it was South Island, where the landscape and the New Zealanders were no less impressive, both possessing an unspoilt quality. The Gurkhas and New Zealand Army had fought many times together, and the mutual

respect and affection was unshakeable. Our other historical link was the scaling of Everest in 1957 by New Zealander Sir Edmund Hilary and Nepalese Sherpa Tensing Norge. Following the achievement Sir Edmund began charitable educational and healthcare work in Nepal, which continues to this day. Whilst in New Zealand on this occasion, we were honoured to receive a gracious visit from Sir Edmund's wife.

The first year as Battalion Training Officer flew busily by, and thoughts of 'what next' were soon on my mind again. An RAF guy attached to us got chatting one day, and he asked about caste, and what he had heard about the Thakuris and the Gurkhas. In the course of conversation he suggested I might try for a career transfer to the RAF. Whatever the possibilities in that direction, there seemed no time to pursue them with the pressures of the job in hand. The battalion had been assigned to a further Operation Herrick, and things were cranking up by the day. Every ounce of commitment was required to attend to those soon going to Afghanistan – booking firing ranges and organising training schedules and briefings.

In mid-2009 the battalion's scheduled arms plot move took 1 RGR and 2 RGR to the UK. This relocation, settling the family in, and the full-on pre-deployment training left little space in my head. It was vital above all to do everything possible to prepare the new boys especially, for the battle-hardened enemy they were about to encounter.

By the time this latest Operation Herrick was underway, with the boys I had helped to train and prepare now on deployment in Afghanistan, my appointment as Battalion Training Officer had run its term. What would happen now was largely out of my hands. A Gurkha late entry officer hoping to continue beyond his six-year period could do so, if recommended by his CO. A British officer at this same juncture, with the choice

of whether or not to retire had to be offered some incentive by his CO, assuming the CO wanted him to stay. For a Gurkha the boot was on the other foot, having to convince his CO he was worth keeping on.

My six years post-commission had expired, and I was now in that position. A further six months was granted, with the possibility of an extension later. I spent some time thinking things over. Fundamental for a soldier, is the feel of raw, kinetic war fighting, the danger and the thrill. This I had now tasted. Through training and operational experience in both the Brigade and the SAS I had guided and passed on knowledge to my boys. Now at a rank at least equivalent to my father's when he retired as a Subedar after many years proud service with the Indian Army, I had also achieved the ambition I set myself as a new recruit. During challenging times, this personal goal had spurred me on, and now, knowing Dad would be proud of me, and reassured that my mother and the rest of our family taken care of, I decided the time was right to go.

For most Gurkhas, responsibility to family has always come first, and how to meet that responsibility after leaving the army is an important issue. Gurkha military pensions varied according to the length and location of a soldier's service. In 2004, to seek to address the former disparity in terms and conditions between UK and Hong service, an immigration rule change was backdated to 1st July 1997 – the date the Brigade of Gurkhas' base was moved from Hong Kong to Britain. Pre-1997 years of service were now converted to a UK related amount, equating to a ratio of 3.5 to 1. Service after 1997 was on a 1 to 1 ratio. In my own case, I discovered that 6 years of my UK service with the Pathfinders and 22 SAS – when I had been UK based - had been classed at the Hong Kong rate, the

result being I would receive a pension based on 16 years and 94 days of service, rather than the 21 years and 351 days total qualifying service I had in fact served.

Nevertheless the pension was very welcome, though like almost all Gurkhas and many other people besides, I wasn't expecting or wanting to put my feet up on retirement. The traditional route of security work had provided many ex-Gurkhas with an income after their military service. With very few jobs of any kind in Nepal this had usually meant living in Europe, the Middle East or elsewhere for extended periods, often away from family. In 2004 Tony Blair's government, recognising the efforts of the Gurkha Justice Campaign, had decreed that Gurkhas who had retired after 1997 would be permitted to settle in Britain, the rationale being that '97 was the year the Brigade HQ moved to Britain, so retirees and their families from this period on could be deemed UK residents.

This was welcome news, but left out the many older, and often frail veterans, who, after years of loyal service to Britain, were still struggling to survive in Nepal, walking miles – those that still could - to collect their pensions. The Justice Campaign was determined to help these people, and there was to be strong support from other quarters too. In 2008 the case of six Gurkhas facing deportation came to court. Mr Justice Blake, citing the Military Covenant, upheld their plea. The Royal British Legion, which had launched the 'Honour the Covenant' campaign, invited its members to comment on the settlement issue; the bulk of the replies, many from British ex-soldiers who had served alongside Gurkhas, were generously in favour of granting settlement rights.

By 2008 the Gurkha Justice Campaign had shot into the media spotlight through the endorsement of the actress Joanna Lumley, whose father had served as an officer in the Gurkhas

before and after partition. Not everyone was convinced by the campaign's argument however; there was talk of a strain on public services from the predicted influx, even comments that Gurkhas were mercenaries – a somewhat groundless claim given our oath of allegiance to the Queen.

Though public opinion welcoming the Gurkhas was growing, the government seemed reluctant, and offered to accept pre-1997 retirees who fulfilled certain criteria. This offer would in effect assist only a small minority of the elderly and other men in need, and the Justice Campaign held out, pleading that all ex-Gurkhas, having sworn to defend Britain and her interests to the death if need be, should be entitled to live in Britain. Finally, on 21st May 2009 the Home Secretary Jacqui Smith announced that any Gurkha soldier who had served more than four years in the Brigade could settle permanently in Britain.

Those Gurkhas and their families who chose to live in Britain will surely want to contribute to the country that has welcomed them, and bring their children up to be useful, happy members of society here. British people have a belief in hard work, fair play, and just rewards. This ethos is exemplified in the British Army. Caste divisions have though adversely affected some Gurkhas serving in the Brigade. This is not confined to any one caste, and to an extent is a reflection of Nepalese civil society. The Chetri and Brahmin castes have in the past tended to predominate in government and the civil service, since they value and have had access to better education. Hence members of these castes can have a tough time when they join the Gurkhas and find Gurung and Magar from the West of Nepal, together with Rai and Limbu from the East – who for a long time lacked influence in Nepal, but are numerically dominant in the Brigade - outranking and outnumbering them. There are opportunities to settle scores for real or imagined past slights,

as in the case of one Chetri recruit who found himself under the unsympathetic command of a man from another caste, and whom the Chetri boy's father had at one time treated badly back in Nepal.

Equally, on an individual level strong friendships have always been possible across castes. One of my best friends from our time in the Brigade remains Kusang Gurung, the champion of the Khud Race, and three times winner of the now hugely popular 'Climbathon' at Malaysia's Mount Kota Kinabalu. Others whose caste may have held them back in the Brigade go on to high achievement later, such as martial arts master Rajkumar Rai who, denied the chance to compete for an Olympic medal during his service became a world renowned Tae Kwon Do champion, founding his own school in Canada.

It is human nature to help your brother, nephew, fellow club or caste member. In this respect nepotism if you like to call it that is quite understandable and has always been a fact of life in many parts of the world. Corruption where money is involved is slightly different and arguably more serious. In Britain honesty and openness in public life has always been seen as a core value, explaining perhaps the anger at the MPs who lied to obtain thousands of pounds in expenses from the public. Nepal is far from exempt, where acceptance of bribes for visas and concessions is by no means uncommon among bureaucrats. A number of Gurkha families bound for Britain have been scammed out of their hard earned savings by Nepalese conmen, with empty promises of jobs and homes.

The British Army strives admirably to be a true meritocracy. At present there still exists caste discrimination in the Brigade of Gurkhas. The relationship between the Gurkhas and the British Army is a unique one. Going back almost two hundred years, with its roots in the old East India Company, aspects of

the colonial way of life continued among the military clans on both sides after the British Empire. The Nepalese and Indian villagers would receive the British like visiting royalty, competing caste against caste to offer the most sumptuous feasts, the largest gifts, to be the more deferential. A culture of patronage must have been inevitable, and this can still be observed today in some quarters.

It must be stressed that I have never known caste to affect men's conduct on the battlefield. When lives are at stake Gurkha and British soldiers support each other equally and unfailingly, regardless of race, nationality, religion or caste. Having said that, battles live on not only in military archives but also in the memories of the soldiers who fought, and for some, the official version of events has painful omissions. Like the story I heard as a young rifleman, of the unsung hero of the Malayan campaign. Over the years I had often wondered what had become of this old soldier after leaving the army.

In mid 2011, browsing through a Nepalese newspaper distributed in the UK, an article caught my eye. It was an interview with a Gurkha veteran, concerning an incident in Malaya in the 1960s. It told of an action against insurgents by a river, involving an extended gun battle. On subsequent examination of the scene, and a bullet-scarred rubber tree, officers assured the Gurkha he would be in line for a medal. However, despite playing a crucial role in the battle, and others receiving prestigious awards, his own actions had never been recognised or recorded. The Gurkha was named as a Mr Dhanga B Shahi, a member of the Thakuri caste. It had to be the same man.

I was eager to find out more, if possible from the unsung hero himself. After some enquires I discovered he was living in Aldershot, and in due course was put in touch with his family.

In November 2011 I was invited to his home. Dhanga was very welcoming. He was also a very good conversationalist – not only in Nepali, but also Malay. In fact his fluency in the latter was truly amazing, given it was now forty years since he had been in Malaya. His linguistic ability also played an important part in events out there, as we shall see. Dhanga told me he had joined the Gurkhas in 1959, and in the 1960s was sent with his comrades to Malaya, to join the ongoing fight against the Indonesian insurgents. His story of what happened over three days in the jungle in January 1965 was as follows:

'I was a member of a pioneer platoon, which in turn was part of an HQ company. HQ's intended role was not primarily on the battlefield, but to provide support for four rifle companies in their areas of responsibility across the jungle, supplying them with rations, munitions, or whatever else was needed. On January 11th we received a radio communication from 105 Artillery - a gun crew comprising twelve men and three wheel guns, at the time deployed near the village of Batulingtang, situated a few miles from us. 105 reported suspicious activity within the vicinity of their base, and suspected enemy forces were spying on them. Concerned that an attack was imminent, they were now requesting our urgent support.'

'HQ tasked our pioneer platoon to provide this support. There were fifteen of us, plus two signallers, at that time signallers being Gurkhas who spoke better English than most, meaning they could communicate with the Gorah (white men) officers over the radio. Under the command of Sergeant Nandaraj Gurung we picked up fourteen days' rations and made our way through the jungle to meet with 105 Artillery. Their base lay some five hundred yards from a river, spanned by a single footbridge that led to the village on the opposite bank. 105's British commander proceeded to give us his situational report,

including the suspected enemy activity they had been observing nearby. 105's three big guns were already positioned and pre-sighted to cover the far side of the river.'

'The following day we began to deploy forward of the artillery base, patrolling and conducting a reconnaissance of the area, including among the inhabitants. For the latter I was utilised a great deal, since I spoke Malay and could converse easily with the locals. From these conversations we learned that within the last few hours, significant numbers of Indonesian troops had been seen moving back and forth near the village.'

'On the 13th we continued our patrols into the mid afternoon, and in the dense jungle twilight began to close in. The platoon prepared for the coming night, our commander Sergeant Nadaraj Gurung and fourteen of his men establishing a harbour – a triangulated, all round defence position - some two hundred yards back from the river. Meanwhile the remaining two being myself Gun No 2, and my comrade Resham Thapa Gun No 1, carrying our 7.62 GPMG automatic weapon, spaced ourselves a few feet apart and hid in the deep undergrowth close to the river. From here we could observe the footbridge, and if required seal off an enemy approach from the village. With little sleep in the past twenty-four hours we were now both quite drowsy.'

'Around 4 p.m. I noticed some movement on the bridge. A figure started to come forward, followed quickly by a second, then a third. Peering into the half-light through thick foliage, I could not be certain whether these were friendly forces, who we knew to be operating in the area, or enemy troops. As the shadowy forms continued to appear and take up positions, I took careful note of where each man placed himself. Observing their actions, I now knew they were enemy, and we were in grave danger.'

'To alert Resham I flicked a small stone towards him but without success. I had counted eleven men, and there were more waiting across the bridge. The rest of our platoon was only two hundred yards behind us, but their brief for this situation was to stay put in harbour position, covering 105's base to their rear. Our brief was to withdraw to the platoon, but with eleven men already surrounding us, moving now would mean certain death. Then I saw something ahead, and realised: the end is near for us anyway. A few yards off a gunner was setting up a GPMG. There was only one thing to do. I thought of my family and my home in Nepal, and that I would never see them again. I raised my rifle and took the gunner in my sights then squeezed the trigger. Hearing a cry of pain, I topped it up with a few rounds to ensure he was dead. Immediately another man appeared and made a grab for the GPMG. Keeping my position I fired again, and he too went down. I saw the two of them clearly, their suffering audible as slowly, they died. It was the first time I had killed a man, and though I had been trained for it and told that human beings like all animals rarely die quickly or cleanly especially in battle, the experience sickened me.'

'By now my comrade Resham had opened up with our own GPMG. Though he had not seen where the enemy had positioned themselves as I had, the noise and covering fire of the GPMG was sufficient to keep them suppressed, enabling me to target them individually. The adrenalin had now begun to pump; each time I took aim I saw another man fall, another body lurch and stagger, emitting the same awful, agonising death moan. Shots were coming back at me, whizzing overhead or slicing into the rubber trees. My position though was strong, while the Indonesian fighters, who for some reason fired from the

right hand side of the tree trunks, leaving their bodies exposed, presented ready targets. Each time I shot and saw a body drop, I counted: one…two…three…'

'I do not know how long I continued firing at these armed shadows in the darkened jungle. It might have been an hour, a half hour, probably somewhere between. The pre-sighted guns of 105 Artillery had opened up and been shelling the opposite bank of the river to hold the rest of the enemy at bay. I knew I had killed a total of eleven men. When it seemed safe, Resham and I moved cautiously from our positions. Amazingly neither of us was hurt. We picked our way back to the platoon, where the platoon commander Sergeant Nandaraj greeted us. "We thought we had lost you," he said. I myself could barely believe I was alive. I reported that I had killed eleven of the enemy. The platoon commander did not believe this.'

'That night the platoon pushed back a few hundred yards to 105 and harboured. The following day we were ordered to return to the scene of the battle to meet with the friendly forces. They found eleven enemy dead, which I confirmed I had killed. A helicopter was called up to transport the bodies to Company HQ, where a large grave was dug. Recovered from the enemy were nine rifles, one SMG and one GPMG, 32,000 Indonesian rupees and 2,800 Malaysian ringgits, nine watches and twenty-two grenades. By my former position on the bank were two scarred trees, on which we counted thirty-one bullet holes from enemy fire. No further Indonesian fighters had been able to get across the bridge. The Gorah (British) commander said to me, "Well done Dhanga, you'll probably get the VC." Meanwhile Resham and I were each given a watch and 300 Malaysian dollars.'

'Five months later at the medal ceremony, 105's British commander, for a number of achievements was awarded the DSO. Our platoon commander, a Gurung, received the Military Cross and was promoted, extending the length of his career. Resham, who had been with me during the gun battle by the river, received the Military Medal. My name was never mentioned.'

It was quite a story, and I thanked Dhanga for sharing it with me. I asked him how he felt afterwards, and what happened subsequently. He told me that being saddened and frustrated over the affair, he was on the verge of quitting the British Army and returning home to Nepal. His senior officers persuaded him otherwise, pointing out he would be worse off, at least financially.

I knew too from other sources that though disheartened Dhanga remained a good soldier. In one action he captured a three man enemy patrol, and in the same tour gave vital medical treatment to his company sergeant major. After serving a further eleven years however he felt he had had enough, and submitted his resignation. Forty-six years later, Dhanga could recall every detail of that day at Batulingtang, the day he thought would be his last. Others who were present have since confirmed his story. The full significance of his actions should not be underestimated; not only did he impede the opposition by killing eleven of their men, but in neutralising the enemy's powerful GPMG, and holding back further incursion, it is quite likely he saved the whole seventeen man platoon from being wiped out.

Though philosophical about his experience, he was in no doubt that being a Thakuri was the reason he was airbrushed from military history. 'Because the Gorah (the white man) did not see it, it was not written down, and so it did not happen.'

A British officer who compiled the report of the action has apparently spoken to Dhanga, and confirmed this; that on collecting the eleven bodies they could not write him into the report because they didn't see it happen and no one who had been with him would, at the time, attest to the major part he had played. The British officer who congratulated him on the day, and believed he would be in line for a medal, has also met with Dhanga, and they have talked over what happened all those years ago.

No one expects a reward for doing one's duty, but here was a man refused any acknowledgement for his considerable bravery and effort, while others were given medals. Dhanga never sought redress, or lodged a complaint about what happened –there was no appeal process in those days - other than to end his career prematurely. Those with the appropriate authority, now knowing of his experience might now offer in some form the acknowledgement that for forty-six years has been denied him. If so, perhaps the little known story of which it forms a part, the negative influence of caste in the Brigade of Gurkhas, can also have its closing chapter. The boys who join in the future can then be assured they do not need a particular name or caste to serve and achieve their personal best - just commitment, loyalty and courage. That is fair play.

There are many stories of Gurkha courage and commitment to their fellow human beings, both on and off the battlefield. One dramatic and more recent incident took place during a railway journey across the vast country of India in the year 2010. Among the many passengers on the train, accompanied by her parents, was a young female student, who had gained a place at medical college and was about to begin her first term studying to become a doctor. Also aboard, seated near the family, was a Gurkha soldier, soon to be retired.

The train had been en route for some time when, passing through an isolated area, a commotion was heard in one of the carriages. The train had been ambushed and boarded by a large gang of Dacoits, vicious bandits notorious throughout India for preying on travellers along the lonely roads and railways. The forty or so Dacoits made their way through the train, relieving the frightened passengers of their money, jewels and anything else of value. In fear of their lives, none dared resist. The Gurkha soldier, being on his own and with only a short time left in the army felt equally acquiescent, knowing the wisest strategy was to sit out the robbery and not risk anyone getting hurt.

When the Dacoits' eyes lighted on the young female medical student and her family however, it became clear from the men's glances and conversation that something far more horrifying than robbery was about to take place. The Gurkha soldier, seeing that the poor girl was about to be raped knew he could no longer sit by. He drew his khukuri and sprang into action. Though outnumbered forty to one, in the confined space of the railway carriage his opponents were unable to surround him, and in an awesome display of fighting prowess he saw off one after another, killing or injuring them until the remaining bandits took to their heels and fled the train. When the authorities arrived the railway carriage was piled high with the bodies of the Dacoits. Throughout India he was immediately hailed as a hero, his service in the Gurkhas extended and the family of the girl he had saved rewarded him.

Two more exemplary soldiers must be mentioned here. In October 2012 the sad news was received from Afghanistan that Lieutenant Edward Drummond-Baxter aged 29, and Lance Corporal Siddhanta Kunwar, aged 28, of 1st Battalion the Royal Gurkha Rifles had been shot dead by rogue Afghan

police officers at a checkpoint in Helmand Province. Glowing tributes were paid to both men's character and keen sense of duty. Lieutenant Drummond-Baxter, described by his CO as utterly courageous and proven to be a calm and steady leader under fire, was on his first operational tour of Afghanistan.

Siddhanta was my friend and comrade. He had been the top cover gunner on my vehicle the day we were ambushed on Highway 1, and in the aftermath of the explosion had acted with courage and professionalism in helping to safeguard our large convoy from further attacks. The CO described him as 'Strong and highly experienced, he stood out from the crowd, not only as a highly capable sniper, but also for his sense of fun, whatever the situation he found himself in. On this his third tour of Afghanistan, he knew the dangers and understood better than most what it meant to do his job at the toughest end of soldiering. As such he was a role model for the younger soldiers around him. They in turn responded greatly to his guidance and experience, but also to his caring nature...he would have done anything to support his comrades and friends around him.'

Though poor in material terms, Nepal is blessed with a rich diversity of climate and terrain, flora and fauna, from the dense hardwood jungles of the south where elephants, tigers and rhinos roam, up towards Kathmandu and the beautiful valleys that open out with colourful displays of crops nurtured on the steep slopes. The northern hills, a playground for squirrels and red pandas among the wild rhododendrons, stretches towards the foothills of the Himalayas, the populous heartland of Nepal, home of the mythical Yeti, the Abominable Snowman. Depending on the weather the Himalayan range can be viewed

from some point in almost every region of Nepal, the snow-covered peaks a unifying image for all who live within sight of them, a vision of grandeur - a vast, silent, watching presence.

But change is occurring. Along with demographic enlargement – since I was a boy Nepal's population is estimated to have quadrupled from ten million to forty million – have come the engines of modernity. Huge earthmoving machines can be seen carving roads out of the hillsides, bringing in their wake further monstrosities, cars and trucks shattering the silence as they roar through places of natural beauty that have lain untouched since God created them. The roads let in the voracious loggers to fell the hardwood forests, the once impenetrable kingdom of the tiger.

The effects of road building are more than noise and deforestation. The disturbed landscape has led in many places to severe soil erosion, the collapsed terrain impossible to farm. Much of the riches of Nepal lie in her naturally fertile soil combined with a climate, which with careful management can produce three crops a year, wheat, maize and rice, on the same land.

So too with the rivers, which no one lives near for fear of flooding. Water has therefore to be carried long distances. If the river banks were maintained, with proper irrigation channels, flood risks could be eliminated at the same time taking water where it was needed, to crops and people. With the expanding population has come the need for more housing, but with virtually no planning controls it is the most fertile land that is being built on. These problems stem largely from lack of co-ordination, a unified mindset. The trees grow fairly quickly, and with sufficient care there could be sustainability, and foresting need not mean deforestation. But to achieve a joined-up approach in a country split by caste, regional and

political differences, and where opportunities for individuals to make easy money can blind them to the long-term needs of the country, would be a challenge to say the least. It would mean curbing the other side of the Nepalese character - clannishness and putting the vested interests of one's own family or caste before wider national aims and responsibilities.

A worrying development is that, at the time of writing people in Nepal are fighting to carve the country up geo-politically, along caste lines. Gurkha recruitment to the British Army has also been denounced on ideological grounds The economic benefits the Brigade brings to Nepal though are undeniable, the ripple effect of soldiers' pay packets making a huge difference to whole communities. It is hard to see what else at present could bring equal value to the economy. Of course money can also be a curse. Some of the teenage offspring of Gurkhas in Hong Kong and Nepal, growing up with more disposable cash than personal motivation, have been known to succumb to drugs and alcohol, in some instances with tragic outcome.

Like Nepal, Britain is a patchwork. Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland each have their own strong sense of identity. Economically there seem huge gaps throughout Britain, rich and poor far wider apart than Nepal, where almost everyone is by comparison very poor. Recognising this, in particular the challenges faced by Gurkha veterans of the Second World War who had not served the minimum fifteen years to qualify for a British Army pension, in 1969 the Gurkha Welfare Trust was formed. From the outset the trust has provided financial and moral support for these men, and more recent veterans and their families in Nepal, buying farms and land and helping the ex-soldiers to work them productively. Medical and educational help has also been made available, together with a wide range of other benefits. The administration of the Gurkha Welfare

Trust is largely paid for by the Ministry of Defence, and raises additional funds through donation, legacies and other charitable initiatives.

While money is a necessity in the modern world, there is also a saying that some of the best things in life are free. Whoever you are in Britain there is something to enjoy in the natural environment, the countryside. Britain is a land of great scenic beauty, and people are rightly concerned to protect it, whether the mountains of Scotland and Wales, or the meadows, hills and valleys of the Home Counties. I have often walked or run along the South Downs of Sussex and Surrey, marvelling at the breathtaking views on a clear day. Where Nepal's landscape is rugged and real, to me the English countryside appears as a beautiful painting, the hedgerows and green fields dotted with sheep and the white suspended clouds, perfect in every brush stroke.

Those green fields and several of the towns of England are now home for many Nepalese people. As their children and grandchildren grow, it will be the only home they have known. These second and third generation children will I hope continue to be proud of their British identity and do much for their country of birth, yet value their Nepalese ancestry, seeing that country progress harmoniously, the poverty of its people eased while preserving the magnificence of its landscape and wildlife.

Some of the boys raised in Britain (who knows, girls too at some point?) may wish to follow in their fathers' and grandfathers' footsteps by joining the Gurkhas - assuming the current reductions in numbers do not make the aspiration impossible. Gurkha regiments currently make up 3% of Britain's infantry, and have played a significant role in its diverse operations through two world wars and beyond. The

commitment, skill and courage of those now serving I believe to be as strong as ever, so too their reputation worldwide. If these vital attributes continue to be valued by both the British Army and the British people, then the Gurkhas, whose legacy of glory and honour shines out from the pages of military history, are assured an equally worthwhile future.

As a young man I was given a remarkable opportunity. Being accepted into the Brigade of Gurkhas was not only the chance to aspire to a better life and to emulate my father's achievement. I had the privilege of joining a unique institution, and through it learning and developing a remarkable range of skills, not least of them the English language. I was able to make a contribution to peace, stability and justice in some of the most troubled parts of the globe, and in the process of deployment or training, to travel to five continents.

I was honoured again to serve in the Pathfinders and the SAS, to be granted the responsibility of becoming an officer, leading and I hope inspiring other young men, including young Gurkhas to strive and aim high in their conduct and their profession. And I would never have dreamed that one day I would be serving alongside Lieutenant Wales, Prince Harry in one of the most volatile battlefields in the world.

I could never have done these things had it not been for the British Army, and the British people. To all who have helped my comrades and me in this way, either personally or through your support for the Gurkhas, I give you my heartfelt thanks. Now, the hill boy from Nepal, I have been given another opportunity; to live in England's green and pleasant land, and it is from here that my next adventure begins.

Glossary

1 RGR	1st Battalion the Royal Gurkha Rifles
2/2 GR	2nd Battalion 2nd King Edward V11 Own Gurkha Rifles (ex Sirmoors)
2 IC	2nd in Command
2 RGR	2nd Battalion The Royal Gurkha Rifles
AFV	Armoured Fighting Vehicles
AOR	Area Of Responsibility
ARO	Area Recruiting Officer (Nepal)
CO	Commanding Officer
CT	Counter Terrorism
CWIED	Command Wire Improvised Explosive Device
DRO	Depot Recruiting Officer
ERE	Extra Regimental Employment
E and E	Escape and evasion
FAC	Forward Air Controller
FOB	Forward Operating Base
FRV	Final Rendezvous

GPMG SF	General Purpose Machine Gun – Sustained Fire
GTC	Gurkha Training Centre
HALO	High Altitude Low Opening parachute jumping
HQ	Headquarters
HUMINT	Human Intelligence Agency
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
II	Illegal Immigrant – Chinese nationals attempting to enter Hong Kong
ISAF	International Stabilisation Assistance Force
ITC	Infantry Training Centre
IWS	Individual Weapon Sight
JLC	Junior Leadership Cadre
LEOC	Late Entry Officer Commission
NBC	Nuclear Biological and Chemical warfare
NCO	Non Commissioned Officer
NT	Northern Territories of Hong Kong
OC	Officer Commanding
PF	Pathfinder Platoon
PSBC	Platoon Sergeant Battle Course
PT	Physical Training
QGO	Queen's Gurkha Officer

R2I	Resistance To Interrogation
R and R	Rest and Recuperation
RMO	Regimental Medical Officer
RTU	Returned To Unit
RV	Rendezvous
SAAM	Skill At Arms Meetings
SAS	Special Air Service
SBS	Special Boat Service
SCBC	Section Commander Battle Course
SNCO	Senior Non Commissioned Officer
TDBG	Training Depot Brigade of Gurkhas – formerly situated in Hong Kong
UNPROFOR	United Nations Protection Force
VM	Vehicle Mechanics
WMIK	Weapons Mounted In Kit. Open top Land Rover fixed with guns.

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